

## **ICOM Canada Report:**

### **ICOM Milan Conference July 3-9, 2016**

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Unceded xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) territory



Castello Sforzesco, Milan: Opening event of ICOM Conference, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Photo taken by Catherine Cole.

## **Museums Between their Collections and their Environments**

During this joint session, two ICOM committees, the CAMOC and ICAMT, brought together a group of museum professionals and scholars that presented city museum projects by considering the complex relationships between communities, urban-based museum collections and/or architecture. My panel presentation, entitled *Ethnographic Research at MOV: Examining an Institutional Shift towards an Engagement-based model*, explored some of my research at the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) for feedback and discussion to help create clarity in my PhD dissertation writing—a process of revisions with the intended goal to complete a manuscript in the spring of 2018. This included an exploration of the first chapter as well as a brief introduction, which summarized my research contributions and ethnographic fieldwork methodologies. Bringing into focus the theme of the panel, my research findings at MOV were discussed to highlight the emergent institutional shifts that occurred at the museum by assessing a major institutional redirection that began in 2007 to focus on Vancouver and local and diverse city residents' interests and concerns. I presented an overview of my museum ethnography, which follows the disciplinary stream of critical museum anthropology. The latter field of inquiry examines the 'behind the scenes' of how western museum institutions function and the economic, political, historical and sociocultural forces that influence institutional re(directions), larger shifts and transformations and/or static states of existence (Ames 1992; Janes 1995; Macdonald 2002; Marsh 2014). My research contributes to a better understanding of the benefits, challenges and related areas of concern for museums going through similar institutional transitions and large transformations. I also shared my qualitative fieldwork methods, which included attending various museum staff meetings as a participant observer and interviewing former and current staff members, as well as various community project participants on their experiences working at MOV.



Ethnographic fieldwork: Rachel Roy photographing Lyanne Smith and Angus McIntyre (former bus drivers and collectors of public transit ephemera) posing for a MOV exhibition portrait in front of vintage busses. Burnaby, BC, Summer 2015. Photo taken by Viviane Gosselin. Used with permissions, Museum of Vancouver.

In addition, I collected archival documents (reports, grants and other related materials) that would further support and detail the interview material documented. Fifteen people were interviewed at MOV including staff, board members, student summer volunteers, and former staff members. I became an insider at MOV through my volunteer work as a blog writer, and contract auxiliary position as a museum interpreter and visitor studies evaluator. During my presentation, I reflected on my dual insider/outsider positionality and how that influenced the direction of my data collection and analysis. Not only did I collect data on various case studies of exhibition projects that involved community collaborations, repatriation efforts, and audience virtual and collections related contributions, but I also analyzed audience interactions and experiences within a participatory exhibition that focussed on design. The latter included integrating and reflecting on the visitor studies findings that I collected in *The Happy Show* (2015), a design centered exhibition that focussed on Stefan Sagmeister's own philosophical thoughts on such topics as well-being, happiness, and addiction.

I also discussed MOV's focus on repatriation with First Nations as part of the museum's collaborative initiatives. It is important to acknowledge that MOV sits on the unceded

ancestral First Nations territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skxwú7mesh (Squamish) & səliłwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh). With the direction and encouragement of Bruce Miller, professor of anthropology at UBC/MOV Board Member and the work of former curator of history Joan Seidl, the process repatriation was formalized and adopted into MOV's collections policy document in 2008—this is a testament of MOV's institutional shift towards working collaboratively with First Nations communities and recognizing the processes involved on First Nations' terms.<sup>1</sup> In late 2013, MOV received a request from the Sts'ailes First Nation for the repatriation of the Sasq'ets [Sasquatch] mask and “was pleased and honoured to be able to follow through with the repatriation in 2014” (MOV 2014, 28). After my presentation, one audience member did approach me with questions surrounding repatriation in Canada. He was a professor in human geography at a British university and had little background in the process involved in repatriating artefacts back to communities. I explained that in Canadian museums, each repatriation initiative is particular and different in connection with a cultural community, families and the individuals involved.

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed and examined MOV shift from a collection to an engagement-focussed model. The case studies discussed in my presentation became concrete examples of how this manifested in MOV exhibition projects and the related challenges, successes and potential next steps moving forward. I ended my presentation with a question that frames the focus of the second chapter in my dissertation—how does MOV's focus on audience engagement and community collaboration impact the role of collections? Near the end of my fieldwork, MOV staff and management started to consider the adoption of a collections plan on what Vancouver-based collecting means moving forward. My second chapter reflects on curatorial, conservation and collections staff and their particular roles before, during and after MOV's shift towards an engagement based model.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the ICOM conference, MOV has been involved in a large collaborative project with the Haida. *Haida Now* (2018-2020) was guest curated by Haida Curator Kwiaahwah Jone in collaboration with Viviane Gosselin, Co-curator and Director of Collections & Exhibitions at MOV and features over 450 works created as early as 1890. This latter project marks only the beginning of this process as MOV will work with the Haida and other First Nations communities in repatriating materials back to their rightful owners.

Central to many of the panel presentations was the idea of stories surrounding various forms of urban materiality, cultural spaces/places and their relevance to urban populations historically and contemporaneously. One talk in particular entitled “The Cultural Landscape of the Amsterdam Red Light District” was pertinent to my city museum research. AnneMarie de Wildt, curator of the Amsterdam Historical Museum (now Amsterdam Museum), has worked and been involved in the Red Light District for many years. She spoke of her 2010 project with artists, prostitutes and former prostitutes, brothel owners, clients, residents, city official and academics researching the areas and its history. De Wildt discussed her current research project, entitled “Framing Prostitution” at the Amsterdam Museum. She explained, “My research project focuses on the triangle between curators – objects/artists—and the public in relation to this controversial subject” (De Wildt CAMOC/ICAMT Joint Session, 2016). De Wildt discusses the complex and layered history of the RLD as a cultural landscape that demonstrated the intersection of economic and cultural changes, urban planning, national and local politics. Some intriguing questions that de Wildt posed for post-reflection included: “What could be the role of the city museum in interpreting or maybe even safeguarding this exceptional cultural landscape? [Should the Museum] collect brothel interiors for the collection, document oral histories with the sex workers and residents, help tourists and residents read the area and all its historical layers better? She also described a more recent gentrification in which the RLD community “consists of very different people with conflicting interests” and asked “Should we [museum] support the sex workers in their struggle?” Some points of intersection exist in terms of Vancouver’s gentrification and the related unaffordable housing crisis, which continues to be a controversial issue framing the city’s cultural landscape. During my fieldwork at MOV, the public engagement staff began to address this issue by organizing an exhibition, panels and other related architecture/design programs that provoked audience discussions on Vancouver’s growing housing affordability crisis. *Your Future Home* (2016), curated by Greg Dreicer, is a more recent MOV exhibition, which discussed ongoing and relevant issues of renting, real estate, and affordability faced by everyone living in Vancouver. Also related to De Wildt’s RLD project, was *Sex Talk in the City* (2013) curated by Viviane Gosselin and related programming established a collaborative relationship with

members of the LGBTQ community, sex workers and educators in Vancouver to address their unique stories, histories and identities in the city.

### **Making new Connections with the CAMOC Committee of Urban Museologists**

With a particular research focus on city museums, I gravitated towards CAMOC as a committee of theoretical and professional interests. I drew from urban museological literature focusing on the complex relationships and interconnections between cities and museums. In this regard, it was especially inspiring to have the opportunity to meet many urban museologists at the ICOM conference, learn about their current projects, and have the opportunity to share my research with them. On point with my research focus on city museums' relationships with diverse communities and networks of connection, Tisdale and Norris explored the role and importance of urban cultural landscapes (2016 Joint CAMOC/ICOFOM/MINOM session).



Rainy Tisdale and Linda Norris discuss Cities and Creativity during the Museums and Urban Cultural Landscapes Panel, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in Milan. Photo taken by Rachel Roy.

Tisdale noted public spaces as “third spaces” that cross-pollinate with other urban areas including museums, other cultural institutions and individual creators (ie artists). In particular, they described how city museum can work with residents to problem-solve the city; document and shine light on the city’s creativity (ie cultural maps of the city); offer

resources (including the collection) for inspiration; and as a place that nurtures cross-pollination of people and ideas. Tisdale and Norris opened up an audience discussion on what the city museum's role is in the creative cultural landscape. They asked museum professionals to consider their own institutions and whether they are public spaces that inspire creativity and community connection. As a participatory exercise, we used yarn to create a new network between members of the audience.



Rainy Tisdale starts the yarn exercise during the Museums and Urban Cultural Landscapes Panel. July 4, 2016 in Milan. Photo taken by Rachel Roy.

I was also fortunate that many of the 2016 CAMOC executive committee attended my panel presentation. This included Afşin Altayli, Catherine Cole, Marlen Mouliou, Chet Orloff, Joana Sousa Monteiro, and Jelena Savic. After the panel, I went for a meal with a group of CAMOC members and they asked if I would be interested in helping out with communications on a volunteer basis. This involved helping brainstorm online communications strategies for their website including what kinds of social media sites would best circulate CAMOC related information. Via online conference meetings, I met with a group of CAMOC committee members and we decided on instagram for sharing conference, exhibition and other events as well as facebook and twitter to promote CAMOC and increase the membership-base. We also discussed how to make the CAMOC website more user friendly and added a link to a LinkedIn discussion group.<sup>2</sup> I worked in social media communications with CAMOC for approximately 6 months and

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<sup>2</sup> Please see <http://network.icom.museum/camoc/get-involved/social-media/> for more on CAMOC social media information.

enjoyed this experience and the connections I maintained with other urban museum professionals and scholars—I plan on returning to this volunteer work in the near future.

### **Other CAMOC and ICOM Speakers of Interest**

As a participant of the ICOM Milan conference, I also wanted the opportunity to attend other committee panels to see the diversity of topics being explored in museology internationally. Particular areas of interest included museum management, ethics and migration. David Fleming, director of the National Museums of Liverpool, discussed what he termed ‘the ethical museum (2016, Joint FIHRM/INTERCOM session).<sup>3</sup> He encouraged museums to be brave about representing and supporting social justice issues. Fleming stressed that museum managers and directors are no longer in a place in which they can unquestionably accept funding from controversial private donors and sponsors, but instead must address political and social concerns attached to their financial support. He gave many examples of museums as ‘contact zones’ in which protestors resisted museums’ seeking and securing support of sponsorship and funding bodies. This topic of social justice becomes a very relevant point of discussion as museums move forward exploring politically relevant topics such as the global warming, migration and repatriation of artefacts to their rightful owners.

Fleming’s panel presentation overlaps with a larger and ongoing discussion of ethics, social justice and representation of migrants in museums. In her ICOM panel *The Social Role of Museums: New Migration, New Challenges*, Marlen Mouliou, the 2016 CAMOC chair, reflected on the substantial increase in numbers of refugees in Athens since 2012 (Joint CAMOC/ICOFOM/MINOM session, 2016). She stressed that museums cannot

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of the ethical museum see <http://musingonculture-en.blogspot.com/2016/07/guest-post-ethical-museum-by-david.html>

disregard recent migrations, but instead should focus on the role they must play in the representation of migrants and ongoing relationship building. Migration, Mouliou points out, is a universal human condition and museums can try to help people recognize this fact. She expressed that museums can act as catalysts for difficult discussions surrounding refugees; places of compassion and humility; and trace current social changes; and discuss the positive consequences of diversity (Joint CAMOC/ICOFOM/MINOM session, 2016). Mouliou points out that Open Glasgow Museum is a leading example in these efforts—it is doing promising work with immigrant communities. Giusi Nicolini, Mayor of Lampedusa in Italy also discussed the importance of museums for migrants to meet local inhabitants (Joint CAMOC/ICOFOM/MINOM session, 2016). The Museum of Lampedusa was launching a manifesto on how it could become part of a network and a place to meet new migrants. Nicolini emphasized how important it is for people to meet newcomers so that fear is not perpetuated but instead positive relationships can be established. In this regard, museums can act as networks and places of connection for migrant youth, families, tourists and local inhabitants to cross paths. Certainly, these presentations raised key questions surrounding my own research on the representation of newcomers, refugees and immigrants in city museums. Can MOV be a museum that represents all of Vancouver's communities to the same extent? How is it reflecting that through its exhibitions, programming and collections work with communities ? What lessons, accomplishments and challenges does MOV face as it moves forward in its participatory work with new migrant communities?

## ICOM Social Events around Milan

ICOM organized some excellent social events for people to mingle and get to know the wonders of Milan. Highlights included the conference opening event at Castello Sforzesco, the famous 15<sup>th</sup> century castle that was featuring a display of Michelangelo's Pieta Rondanini and Leonardo da Vinci's newly restored frescos in the "Sala delle Asse". It was a stunning venue to learn about the history of the city and meet more conference participants. The Closing Party was held at Triennale's Palazzo dell'Arte—an exceptional building featuring 21<sup>st</sup> International Triennial Exhibitions for architecture, design, visual/ decorative arts, fashion and audio/video production. Another key highlight included ICOM booking private tours of Leonardo da Vinci's 15<sup>th</sup> century mural *The Last Supper*. As coincidence may have it, I met Prof. Lynn Teather who guided and supported my Masters in Museum Studies (2003-2005) research at the University of Toronto. I shared with her my research progress – her letter of support was instrumental in granting my PhD acceptance to the Department of Anthropology at UBC for my PhD in Museum Anthropology. ICOM participants were also invited to a special live music concert at the Milan Cathedral. This was a wonderful visual and auditory experience – a memory I will treasure for a long time.



Masters of Museum Studies Prof. Lynn Teather and I Reunited at the Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Photo taken by ICOM Participant.

### **ICOM Day Excursions in Italy**

Another unexpected part of the ICOM conference that I enjoyed was the organized excursions. I went to Turin and Bologna, and both were excellent tours with time to meet others, and experience several cultural venues in the cities. In Turin, I went on a tour focusing on contemporary artwork in various public venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art at the Castle of Rivoli, and the National Museum of Cinema at the Mole Antonelliana. The rest of the excursion focused on outside sculptural pieces in various plazas in Turin and ended in the Roman Quadrangle. Our guide had a specific background in contemporary art in Italian urban centers and made the tour incredibly thought provoking and engaging. Participants also met together as a group for a lunch and got to know fellow conference attendees while enjoying an Italian meal on a sunny patio.

Bologna was equally stimulating and one of the most beautiful cities I have explored in Italy to date. We were taken on a tour of the city with architect Daniele Vincenzi with highlights including the first university in continuous operation, University of Bologna which was founded in 1088 as well as Palazzo Pepoli – Museo della Storia di Bologna (Museum of the history of Bologna) which presents the culture, history and transformations of the city from the Etruscan period to the present day. Most fascinating was the Two Towers, Le Due Torri, constructed between 1109-1110. The names of these two towers, Asenelli and Garisenda, represent the two families in competition to showcase their power and domination. The tour ended at an elegant gelato parlour with the most exceptional gelato I have tasted – a necessary treat given the excessive humidity and intense summer heat! Indeed a brilliant way to end a most glorious tour of Bologna.



CAMOC Friends and Colleagues at Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Photo taken by Rachel Roy.

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### Department of Anthropology & Museum of Anthropology UBC

#### My PhD Committee:

Anthony Shelton, Director of MOA (Museum of Anthropology)

Carol Mayer, Head of Curatorial, MOA

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