Cosmopolitan Ambassadors: International exhibitions, cultural diplomacy and the polycentral museum

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Curating and Interpreting Culture
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Preface

Cosmopolitan Ambassadors examines exhibitions that are developed through international partnerships and travel across geographical borders. It addresses a gap in our understanding of a type of museum activity which is growing in popularity, and attracting increasing investment and levels of professionalisation.

The book envisages international exhibitions as mobile contact zones that operate on the boundaries of museum practices, as well as within the realm of international cultural relations. While they are often considered synonymous with blockbusters, and their success equated with high visitation, we explore the extent to which the production and consumption of international exhibitions are influenced by a combination of drivers across diplomatic, museum mission-related, and market-oriented domains. In particular, we examine the proposition that international exhibitions are a means by which museums might represent and advance a cosmopolitan agenda on the world stage.

Grounded in practice through a long-term, multi-sited, “mobile” ethnography, the cosmopolitan and intercultural concerns of the book are reflected in both its content and method. Focusing on a case study of two exhibitions involved in an exchange between Aotearoa1 New Zealand and Mexico, our research traverses both the local and global, exploring how forms of encounter and associated interpretations shift as exhibitions move between different cultural, political and institutional contexts. This approach illuminates the fluidity and contingency of cultural identities and meanings, and the way in which international exhibitions function as deeply intercultural spaces in terms of both the processes and practices through which they are produced, and their potential impact on those involved.

E Tū Ake: Standing Strong was a ground-breaking Indigenous exhibition featuring both traditional and contemporary taonga (Māori cultural treasures) and developed to tour internationally by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa). It was shown briefly in Aotearoa New Zealand before travelling to the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, followed by the Museo Nacional de las Culturas in Mexico, and finally the Musée de la Civilisation, Québec, Canada, between 2011 and 2013. The hosting of E Tū Ake in Mexico constituted the first phase of the inaugural exhibition exchange between the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) and Australasia.

1 Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand. Combining the Māori and European names recognises the fundamental bilingual and bicultural nature of the country.
The second phase involved the development of the exhibition *Aztecs* by Te Papa in collaboration with INAH, and as part of a partnership with two Australian museums. *Aztecs* opened at Te Papa in September 2013, and then toured to Melbourne Museum (MM) and the Australian Museum (AM) in Sydney, before closing and returning to Mexico in February 2015. *Aztecs* involved a high level of institutional collaboration during the exhibition development stage and engaged staff across the executive, administrative and operational levels of several museums in three countries with contrasting museological, institutional and political contexts. At its centre was an ongoing relationship: the closure of *Aztecs* and the return of the collection to Mexico marked the end of a cycle of approximately six years of collaborative work between Te Papa and INAH as part of the exhibition exchange.

Through an in-depth discussion of how this exchange worked in practice, our book demonstrates the importance of better understanding the advantages and disadvantages of various ways of organising international exhibitions, and how such insights may enhance decision-making, reduce potential conflicts and misunderstandings, and help institutions to develop and plan the most appropriate and effective partnerships for their needs.

Further to this, the two exhibitions were underpinned by specific purposes, museological approaches and collaborative practices which led to particular display strategies. These strategies – which mediated and translated cultural meanings in specific ways – impacted on how the exhibitions functioned as intercultural spaces. Extensive interviews with visitors show how audiences connect with the cultural other, negotiate differences and create cosmopolitan and counter-cosmopolitan meanings.

Finally, by examining the intersection between the exhibition exchange and the foreign policy context of the two exchange partners, we are able to highlight the various ways in which museums do cultural diplomacy. This contributes more nuance to a discussion of the value of international exhibitions, and how success might be defined and evaluated.

Building on the insights from our in-depth case study, considered through the lens of existing literature and theory, this book advances an argument for international exhibitions as *cosmopolitan ambassadors* that offer a kaleidoscopic vision that is *polycentral* in nature. It proposes a vision of intercultural museum practice based on the concept of polycentrality and the notion of creating new spaces in between old ways of *doing* and *being*, and offers suggestions to guide this work in practice.
Acknowledgements

Collectively,

We dedicate this book to the many committed museum professionals that worked on the exhibitions and gladly accepted to participate in the research project as interviewees, facilitators and advisors. Also to all the visitors across all venues, especially those who collaborated by sharing their museum experiences: we are delighted and surprised by the power of museums and the chance to see them through your eyes.

We thank Mark Kent without whose vision and kindness this research and book would not have been possible, as he introduced the authors and encouraged us to include Mexico as part of the wider research project. And also to Priscilla Medina for being such a generous accomplice and facilitator during the process.

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And finally, our thanks to Argiris Legatos and his colleagues at Vernon Press for making publication such a smooth and stress-free process.
Leticia Pérez Castellanos,

Special thanks to my colleagues from Dirección de Exposiciones, particularly my former boss Miriam Kaiser. To the New Zealand colleagues and friends I had the chance to meet through this project: Mark, Moana, Liz, Jeff, Robert. Also to Andres Triana, who welcomed this research project at ENCRyM. I dedicate this book to my parents for all their love and support, and, finally to my love, accomplice and listener Paul.

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Thank you to Gaëlle, my original co-conspirator, for initiating the first study of *E Tū Ake* in Paris and Quebec that set the ball rolling for everything that followed. I wish to thank the staff and students at ENCRyM and others in Mexico City who hosted me during my visits. You made me so welcome it came to feel like my second home and you, my second family. I will be forever grateful for this experience. Thanks as always to my wonderful colleagues at Victoria University of Wellington, especially Conal, Annie and Pippa – for always being so supportive and willing to listen and provide advice. Finally to my family, for your love and craziness that kept me sane throughout this long process.
Chapter 1

Thinking through international exhibitions

Since the nineteenth century, museums have been deeply implicated in both nation building and the global circulation of culture. In the twenty-first century, international exhibitions have become a regular fixture at major cultural institutions across the globe. They are, perhaps, the most complex, large-scale, expensive and specialised work in contemporary museums. This book examines exhibitions, developed through international partnerships, that travel across geographical borders and are usually, but not always, exhibited at more than one venue. The focus is cultural exhibitions, but the analysis is not without relevance for other types of exhibitions.

International exhibitions are one of the ways through which museums today work internationally. Other activities include conferences and workshops, professional exchanges, internship programmes, joint research projects, satellite museums (Goff 2017) and digital media. Bennett (2006, 48) warns against falsely regarding the internationalisation of museums as a recent phenomenon. Museums have, he reminds us, long been part of “global networks organizing flows of things, people, and expertise … [and] actively implicated in the organization of new international networks, promoting new transnational forms of cultural exchange and perception”. What is new are the technologies that facilitate the international networks, the types of expertise that they connect and the “styles of cosmopolitanism” affected by these connections (Bennett 2006, 49).

With international exhibitions, it is not only objects that are mobile, but also people—the museum professionals who negotiate, develop and tour these exhibitions in collaboration with international colleagues—and travelling along with them is an assortment of cultural, professional and personal baggage. In doing this work, museum professionals must often negotiate complex political, institutional and museological differences. Likewise, the visitors arriving to experience the exhibitions that are the product of these intensive processes engage with them through the lenses of their own particular contexts. Furthermore, these exhibitions form part of the transnational work of museums which is implicated in systems of international cultural relations and politics. Their meaning and intentions relate, therefore, not only to mu-
museum missions, visitor attraction and enlightenment, but also to national and international diplomatic agendas. To properly understand international exhibitions we must consider all these facets.

A main premise of the book is that international exhibitions involve myriad forms of cultural encounter and therefore countless opportunities for misunderstanding and mis-representation but, at the same time, significant potential for developing intercultural skills, understanding and what is referred to as a cosmopolitan imagination or vision (Delanty 2006; Beck 2006)—deemed by many as essential for navigating the accelerating processes of globalisation within which we find ourselves in the twenty-first century. At the heart of Cosmopolitan Ambassadors is the tentative proposition that international exhibitions are a means by which museums might represent and advance a cosmopolitan agenda on the world stage. To achieve such an aspiration, we need to strive for more clarity around the purpose, practice and potential impact of international exhibitions.

To this end, we first set out the historical context of international exhibitions in terms of the issues and debates that have surrounded them. This is not intended as a comprehensive history, but rather as a series of examples that illustrate the mix of purposes that international exhibitions have served, against the background of changing historical conditions. On the basis of this, we propose a model to convey the varied drivers of international exhibitions. Next, we outline some of the most important current issues and research needs facing international exhibitions as a means of framing the aims and scope of the book. Key to this is proposing an analytical framework within which a theoretical understanding of international exhibitions may be developed. On this foundation, we proceed to explore the propositions presented in Chapter 1 through the empirical investigation of an international exhibition exchange between Mexico and Aotearoa New Zealand.

International exhibitions past and present: key issues and debates

In April 2016, The Art Newspaper reported that the top two exhibitions of ‘antiquities’ in the previous year, measured by daily visitation, were Cleopatra and Queens of Egypt at the Tokyo National Museum and Pompeii: Culture of the Ancient Roman City at the National Museum of Korea. Each attracted over 200,000 paying visitors in total. These figures pale somewhat next to the most successful art exhibitions noted, such as the National Palace Museum Taipei’s touring exhibition Hidden Talent: Cheng Cheng-po which reached a visitation of 1,607,736 (a daily average of 13,860 visitors) at its home venue. However, special mention is also made of the fourth-placed Palmyra, which received over 300,000 visitors during its six months on display. A free exhibition at the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C., Palmyra featured Haliphat, a
Thinking through international exhibitions

1,800-year-old Palmyrene funerary bust and a selection of eighteenth-century engravings and nineteenth-century photographs of Palmyra, Syria. As the Newspaper points out, this ancient Roman city was in the international spotlight in 2015 when it fell under the control of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), who reportedly damaged a number of significant ancient monuments that had “inspired a legion of Western architects” (The Art Newspaper 2016, XIV).

International exhibitions are often considered synonymous with blockbuster exhibitions, and success is commonly equated with high visitation. Since the 1970s, European art, dinosaurs, Egyptian mummies and pop culture have formed the staple of touring exhibitions, breaking visitation records at museums around the world (Berryman 2013; Bradburne 2001). Such exhibitions have been the subject of intensive critique. They are, according to some, no more than blatant revenue generators driven by popular appeal (Basu and Macdonald 2007; Barker 1999; S. West 1995). Capitalising on the appeal of monumental, spectacular and priceless art and artefacts, blockbusters are seen as a strategy to boost visitor numbers by attracting less frequent museum visitors (Berryman 2013). While it is impossible to talk about international exhibitions and ignore the so-called “blockbuster effect”, our focus is broader than this. Indeed, we would argue that the prominence of blockbuster exhibitions has led to the unfortunate perception that international exhibitions are primarily about revenue generation, while in reality their economic benefits are questionable (Boland 2010) and the drivers for their production far more diverse.

The relatively recent focus on blockbusters obscures the reality that museums develop and tour international exhibitions to fulfil an array of strategic goals, including a mix of political, institutional and commercial objectives, and have done so for quite some time. According to Barker (1999, 127), “large-scale, highly publicized art exhibitions drawing several thousand visitors took place as early as the mid-nineteenth century”. The 1905–1906 tour of the British Empire by the Holman Hunt painting The Light of the World, for example, was a curious mix of imperialist motivations with nascent blockbuster strategies of publicity and merchandising. In Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia alone a staggering four million, out of a population of five million, culture-starved colonials flocked to view the painting, drawn to the free exhibition by the allure of the artwork’s enormous value (Troughton 2006). The very popular world fairs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were exploited for a range of commercial and political ends, including imperialism, nationalism and tourism promotion (Greenhalgh 1988).

The 1930s have been identified as an era when artistic masterpieces went on tour in support of the colonial ambitions of fascist regimes in Europe (Amsselm 2013; Lira 2002). In the Americas, the 1930s and 1940s saw numerous
exhibitions of ancient and Latin American art organised by major US institutions as part of a policy called Pan-Americanism, including eight shows at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) between 1940 and 1945 (Braun 1993). One of these—*Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (1940)—grew out of US diplomatic interventions that followed the Mexican nationalisation of oil companies in 1938. According to Mewburn (1998), the strategic objectives of the US and Mexican governments, as well as MoMA, coalesced in the staging of this collaborative exhibition and the particular narrative it sought to tell. For President Roosevelt, it was “an attempt to build popular support and confidence” for his policy of hemispheric solidarity, while for Mexico, the exhibition was an opportunity for the “normalization of restructured economic relations with the United States … while maintaining its newly asserted national dignity” (Mewburn 1998, 89):

By virtue of its festive spirit, the conditions for a non-confrontational, even friendly, future of cultural exchange was established … Packaged as the product of a noble indigenous lineage, Mexico traded its accumulated capital—oil, raw materials, dependability as a war ally, and its culture—in return for financial recovery and national security … The Museum of Modern Art, in its turn, acquired an American archaic past with its living indigenous cultural counterpart. (Mewburn 1998, 129)

In the aftermath of World War Two, UNESCO established a programme to encourage member states to prepare exhibitions for “exchange” and “international circulation”, with the intention of “encouraging understanding among nations” (McCann Morley 1953, 284). The first exhibition under the programme was *Australian Aboriginal Culture* which began a two-year tour of the US in 1953. International understanding was a common justification for international museum activity during this period, with a focus on cultural exhibitions that emphasised commonalities and sought to convey a message about the “universality of all people” (Tarasoff 1990, 31).

However, achieving these goals could be problematic in practice. MoMA’s *Family of Man* photographic exhibition toured twenty-eight countries between 1955 and 1959 and was seen by over nine million people. It was supported by the US Information Agency which had been established in 1953 “to tell America’s story to the world” (Kennedy 2003, 316). In 1994 the exhibition was permanently installed in Luxembourg’s Clervaux Castle and it was added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2003 (Padley 2013). While intending to promote peace and universality, the exhibition was criticised for “bland internationalism and its willful demeaning of photographic art by using it strictly for political purposes” (Sylvester 2009, 107). According to Kennedy (2003, 323) it “functioned as an advertisement for American values and freedoms” and “the
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