

# Ethics in Danish museums up for debate

---

By Merete Ipsen and Vinnie Nørskov,  
ICOM Denmark

---

Last April, Danish ICOM invited to a seminar on museum ethics at the Museum of Copenhagen. Right at that time, the Icelandic volcano paralyzed air traffic. So, on the morning of the seminar opening, we found ourselves with cancellations from three of four foreign speakers; two of these cancelled talks are presented in written form in this issue of Denmark's Museum Journal. In spite of the reduction, the seminar was very fruitful. Ole Winther, the Danish Heritage Agency, opened the meeting and as the others present were passionate about the subject, the event was characterized by interesting debates and talks. Two of the initiators of the seminar sum up the day.

## Background

For a number of years, Danish ICOM has regularly dealt with single issues when museums from all over Denmark have hosted auctions for anything from benevolent associations to commercial companies or have invited guests to 'what is it worth' events etc. These cases are in a grey area in relation to the Code of Ethics. The media as well have approached us with questions about ICOM's view on for example the presence of foreign cultures' artefacts in Danish museum collections or on the demands for the repatriation of 'Swedish war loot', among other things in connection with Denmark ratifying conventions on cultural heritage.

Many Danish museum employees associate ethics with problematic acquisition of artefacts. This has its roots in history. When the international museum organization developed the first Code in 1970, it dealt with the principles of acquisition, and thus named Code of Acquisitions; the need arose in the wake of an increasing awareness of the relation between the destruction of cultural heritage in a number of developing countries and western museums acquiring artefacts from such countries. So the first ethical code reflected an actual conflict between the museums' acquisitions and the preservation of the cultural heritage on a global scale. Therefore it is not surprising that many people today associate ethics with 'something we should not do' – a limitation or a finger-wagging. Since then the Code has been revised twice; professionalization is the recurring theme in both the 1986 revision



*Two skulls from Medical Museion showing the results of leprosy (left) compared with a normal skull (right). Thomas Söderquist describes the museum's human material as medical heritage Photo: Medical Museion*

and in the present Code of Ethics agreed upon in 2001 in a desire to pull the rules away from the finger-wagging and turn them into a guideline that museum professionals can lean on in their daily work. A method of bringing ethical considerations into museum work on several levels is described by Eva Mæhre Lauritzen.

In an age when the museum as institution is under pressure in different ways and when globalization constantly shortens the distance between civilisations and indigenous peoples

the Code of Ethics can be a good reference point. The rules are guiding parameters of behaviour, not legally binding instructions to act. The Code of Ethics for Museums define a number of minimum requirements dealing with responsibility towards the surrounding society, training of staff, the collections and presentation; they can form the basis of discussions and arrangements with interested parties, municipality and board of directors when evaluating the role and opportunities of the museum.



*These bronze objects are among the many objects withheld at the Copenhagen Airport customs office. When the customs officers retrieve such objects experts from the National Museum of Denmark are called for to identify the objects and prepare a statement. Photo: National Museum of Denmark/Nadia Haupt*

### **The panel debate**

A number of Danish museum professionals had – in addition to the foreign guests – been asked to contribute to the ethics debate based on their museum reality: Anne Højer Petersen, Fuglsang Art Museum; Inger Sjørsløv, the Danish UNESCO National Committee; Jette Sandahl, Museum of Copenhagen; Mille Gabriel and Peter Pentz, both from the Danish National Museum and Thomas Söderqvist, the Medical Museion. Journalist Lotte Folke Kaarsgaard, Information, had been invited to act as moderator. Furthermore, Bernice Murphy – president of ICOM’s ethics committee – participated as well as the other attendees of the meeting.

### **Human material**

A central issue of the debate became the museums’ relation to human material. Skeletons, specimens, Peruvian heads, remains of mummies are important as museum artefacts. Museums holding human material are faced with problems falling in a grey area between ethics, politics, religion and ideology because they are dealing with powerful symbols.

Thomas Söderqvist pointed to the schism between present interest in the body and present desire to change the living body – even the subject of a reality show – and the fear of contact characterizing the museums’ approach to the human body. Söderqvist defined human material as ‘medical cultural heritage’ and he found it hard to understand why we react so strongly to for example the

Taliban destroying the Bamyán sculptures but not to the discarding of human museum material in connection with reburial or cremation.

Peter Pentz in his capacity of archaeologist pointed out another schism in how we deal with human material. We feel that we can do what we like with human material from the Stone and Bronze Ages but when we get to the Middle Ages and are dealing with Christians, they do not appear in the exhibitions. Only among Catholics using bone splinters as relics. A parallel can be found in Iran where Islamic corpses are never put on display. However, grave goods from the Sassanid Period do not present a problem.

In New Zealand, the Maoris have an absolute limitation; they do not allow the exhibition of human materials at all. Jette Sandahl told us about an Egyptian exhibition including mummies that had been offered to the Te Papa Museum. The Maoris would not accept them in the exhibition. Arguing that the Egyptians have no problem with exhibiting their mummies made no difference. The complexity of decisions regarding human material in museums is multi-faceted and even if you want to follow the culture represented by the people involved – which would be ethically correct – it is not always possible.

### **Repatriation**

Should we send artefacts back to a dissolving Afghanistan? When Danish soldiers are offered artefacts deceptively

similar to those confiscated in customs at Copenhagen Airport a few days earlier and returned after an evaluation by the expert from the National Museum? The procedures for such repatriation may not be fully satisfying either. The artefacts are identified, but no report is sent to the state in question. On this background, Peter Pentz raises the question whether Danish museum professionals should always maintain the laws of other countries.

In the repatriation debate it makes a difference whether we are dealing with artefacts or with human material. It also plays a part on what background the object has entered the museum; whether it was a violation of a local population or whether it has been acquired by collection or purchase of objects at that time not being considered valuable by the country or people in question.

Based on her own analysis of the National Museum’s repatriations to Greenland, Mille Gabriel described the artefacts as powerful symbols of what once happened. They are not just an expression of the colonisation that took place, but rather symbols of power over the indigenous peoples. By giving them back, you give back some of the power. Cross-disciplinarily, we concluded that museums are not powerful owners of artefacts. The ownership is placed outside the museums; in society, in traditions, in peoples. The museums must listen to the voices claiming (co-)ownership and respond to them by treating the artefacts with respect and in some cases by returning them.

### **Ethics, politics, power**

Thomas Söderqvist raised the question whether the allegedly museum-ethical questions often hide political agendas. The relationship between ethics and politics repeatedly surfaced during the debate both in connection with human materials, relations to the indigenous peoples, collection of research material, repatriation and experience economy. Fact is that museums are part in political power struggles. Museums do not exist in a vacuum. Inger Sjørsløv could – from her UNESCO position – agree that ethic is politic. And furthermore as an anthropologist argue that everything is touched by the global cultural economy. That is why we should constantly reflect on our actions when we go global. But we should not be afraid of the grey areas. This is where the challenges lie and where the debate about ethical dilemmas gains importance.

In relation to peoples or groups who in one sense or another are objectified by museums, it is necessary to work on building respect and establishing relationships with the involved parties, giving them subject status. The museums work with relative



Excavations at the »Assistens Kirkegård« (churchyard) in Copenhagen were done to facilitate the building of the new metro extension, but it involved excavation of burials only a few decades old. Jette Sandahl compared with ancient burial cultures and described the recently buried as hardly really dead yet. Is it ethically justifiable in relation to the bereaved? Or to the deceased? Photo: Metroselskabet / Lene Skyttte

considerations. Considerations of human rights intrude. In the absolute demands contained in the human rights, ethics help create the political content.

Other examples of the political implications of the ethics question were raised from the audience: the David Collection houses several depictions of Mohammed. Can they be put on display and how should they be displayed? asked Kjeld von Folsach. The museum has been landed with a politico-ethical dilemma brought about by the Mohammed crisis. From the other side of the room, it was mentioned that 25 million kroner have been set aside for the preservation of Danish cultural heritage abroad. What should be preserved and who decides? If the colonial fort in Tranquebar is deemed worthy of preservation, could that compare to the Germans coming to Denmark to preserve the World War II bunkers? The answer must be that if you are able to carry out your intentions and can find the funds for it, then it's okay. But going for the money always holds dangers and must give cause for ethical considerations.

#### Grey areas and debate

Considerations are also required in connection to public events. Anne Højer Petersen has had ethical dilemmas close

to her in relation to events at the museum, as the friends of the museum association suggested an auction to support the new museum. She had to reject this idea, which they did not quite understand! On the other hand, the museum actually hosted an evaluation event where a firm of auctioneers donated their time on a Sunday afternoon; a success in terms of the visitors and an event she was careful not to host in the museum's exhibition areas. But that also goes against the Code of Ethics.

The question is: How ethical should we be without it stopping us from acting? Today the event culture is important and new visitors are drawn in by activities that are more commercial – not just the museum shop. Several people who would not otherwise use the museum are lured in this way. *Not* doing something in order to *not* get your hands dirty does not solve the ethical challenges. Ethically correct is a relative term. But it can be difficult to navigate within the Code because it is not clear from what ethical standpoint it is written – there could be others. In this way the rules may dampen the debate, Söderqvist felt and returned to the point that many of the so-called ethical subjects are in reality ideological or political. When are we actually dealing with an ethical problem?

Jette Sandahl stressed that when we are drawn to working with ethics it is because – among other things – ethics are situated outside a western scientific rationalism. You mean to say irrationalism, Söderqvist estimated. It seems that you are free to choose your position, which means that the Codes of Ethics are individual and thus difficult to handle institutionally, continued Anne Højer Petersen.

What remains are dilemmas and grey areas – the Code of Ethics is constantly debated. And it is important to continue to debate it. Bernice Murphy finished by summing up the debate and the experiences from the ethics committee by underlining that personal is also always political, and that you need to remember that the Code of Ethics is actually the lowest common denominator. You could choose to create a Danish version. Australia has a code of ethics far more explicit than ICOM's code. But what is important is the debate. It is important to reflect on the museum work.

*Translated with permission from 'Danske Museer', vol. 23, no. 4, September 2010*

[www.danskemuseer.com](http://www.danskemuseer.com)