

Museums today are much more than mere transmitters of knowledge; they are places of creativity and facilitators of social change. Through a host of cultural activities (exhibitions, educational and cultural workshops, conferences, publications, and so forth), museums encourage the expression of the cultural and social memory of communities by engaging them in participatory projects. In this sense, museums are places of reconciliation and exchange, as well as of negotiation and representation.

MUSEUMS OF CIVILIZATION TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD

Since its opening in 1988, the Musée de la civilisation (MCQ) has pursued an innovative cultural agenda that focused both on people (as opposed to objects) as well as on the function of disseminating, communicating and sharing knowledge. It introduced in the North American museum landscape a new genre of museum (and a new form of organizational structure) informed by principles of cultural democratization and interdisciplinarity. The inauguration of the Musée followed major developments in museum governance (e.g., UNESCO Round table, Santiago, Chile, 1972) and signalled a shift in thinking about museum practice from that of an object-based to a theme-based cultural institution. As a “musée de société” (museum of society), the MCQ held the values of social inclusion, representation and participation at the centre of its mission.

25 years after its inauguration, the museological complex, now renamed the Musées de la civilisation, continues unabated in its mission to develop meaningful cultural projects based on important societal issues, while simultaneously remaining accessible, open and attentive to the world. Indeed, the Musées still follows its core values of “understanding the world in order to share a collective conscience of humanity and creating meaningful shared experiences” (Cultural mission statement of the MCQ, 2014).

A JOURNAL THAT EXTENDS THE MUSEUM’S FUNDAMENTAL MISSION

The Musées de la civilisation continues to promote the values of openness, exchange, sharing and reflection. The launch of the new refereed journal *THEMA. La revue des Musées de la civilisation* only reaffirms its institutional mission and long-term cultural project.

International, interdisciplinary and multilingual, *THEMA* will publish original contributions that bring a critical and fresh perspective to important societal issues. A journal of contemporary thought and debate, *THEMA* will bridge disciplines and foster comparative approaches in order to illustrate the complexity of societies, past and present, particularly as they relate to museums. The journal will thus further the tradition of the Musées de la civilisation’s core values by examining original and thought-provoking topics in an interdisciplinary way.

Drawing its inspiration from the Greek word θέμα, THEMA joins two concepts: the first refers to the idea of a theme and the several ideas that it comprises, while the second signals something that is momentarily thrust into our attention, like an event or issue that suddenly becomes a current topic of discussion. The journal therefore follows the Musées de la civilisation's theme-based approach and interest in treating important and current issues, particularly those that expound upon the idea of civilization, broadly defined, and its application in a museum context.

THE INAUGURAL ISSUE: KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND EXCHANGE IN TIMES OF CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

This inaugural issue focuses on a theme of central concern to many museums: cultural democracy. Over the past three decades, the relationship between society and culture has undergone numerous and significant transformations. In the name of cultural democracy, a large number of institutions have evolved in order to provide greater public access to culture and knowledge. Many museums have advanced their efforts toward promoting social inclusion and interaction. Some have even set aside collecting and collections-based research in order to concentrate on developing new forms of production, transmission and communication of knowledge. This approach has introduced a new way of thinking about objects that highlights the distinction between research-based and theme-based museums. In the latter, the role of objects has been reconfigured in the service of exhibition-making. Moreover, many museums today adopt an inclusive approach in which individuals and communities are not only placed at the centre of policy objectives, but are also solicited to participate in and contribute to cultural museum projects such as exhibitions.

The concept of cultural democracy has increasingly become a guiding principle around which many institutions attempt to reposition their visitors. In some museums, communities have become partners in the construction of knowledge. The resulting paradigm shift is one of great importance: it no longer suffices to simply guarantee access to knowledge; one must additionally extend the opportunities for sharing and exchanging this knowledge. For museums, this has led to important changes in their social role, in how they prioritize research and collections, in their creation of inclusive exhibition projects, and in the relationships they maintain with their respective communities.

This first issue of THEMA proposes a retrospective and prospective examination of museum practice against the backdrop of cultural democracy. The six contributing authors, coming from various disciplines and countries, address a number of important questions with regard to the role of cultural institutions in the construction, transmission, sharing and exchange of knowledge. Together, they collectively examine the fundamental qualities of cultural democracy, including cultural diversity, social inclusion, and civic participation, all of which call attention to a museum practice that not only aims to make culture more accessible, but also constructs culture for and with the community, with all the challenges such a task involves.

The *Articles* section presents original research and theoretical approaches that emphasize current museum practice. Marc-Olivier Gonseth's personal account of his practice at the MEN embodies in itself the profound transformation of the role of the curator over the past decades and the utilization of museum collections to create meaningful narratives. Indeed, no longer focused solely on object-based research and collecting – although these remain important and necessary aspects of curatorial work –, curatorship today also entails a great deal of creativity to interpret knowledge and create meaningful exhibitions through the use of new media such as ITC. The two following articles by Andrea Witcomb

and Bernadette Lynch respectively highlight museum practice working toward social inclusion and cultural diversity. Through recent exhibition projects in Australia (Witcomb) and the UK (Lynch), the authors address both the potential and limitations of knowledge sharing and exchange between museums and communities. Finally, in her review of the *Sex Talk in the City* project at the Museum of Vancouver, Viviane Gosselin reports on a city museum's unique treatment of a provocative, yet important subject matter. The *Commentary* section presents essays and opinion pieces with the aim of encouraging open dialogue. Yves Bergeron's essay surveys recent transformations in Canadian museums policy. Lastly, the *Gallery* section presents short case studies – works in progress – from around the world. Pedro Ruiz-Castell describes how a University-based exhibition centre in Spain responds to the need to create further links between the University, its collections, and the community.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the authors for their most enriching contributions to this first issue. Jennifer Carter, as a guest member of the editorial board, also provided much appreciated insights and encouragements in the creation of this journal and its first publication. Our gratitude also goes to the collaborators of THEMA, who are many indeed, without whom this journal would not have been possible.

Mathieu Viau-Courville and Mélanie Lanouette
Editors