

Intangible Heritage and the Museum,
New Perspectives on Cultural Preservation, 2012
[by Marilena Alivizatou]

Annette B. Fromm

Intangible Heritage and the Museum, New Perspectives on Cultural Preservation, 2012 [by Marilena Alivizatou]

● **Annette B. Fromm**

Professor, The Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, USA

One would think from the onset that a discourse on intangible heritage in museums is a contradiction in terms. Are not museums built upon rich collections of the tangible, objects representing some aspect of cultural milieu? Is not intangible heritage those thoughts, processes, traditions which have no physical form? Yet, from the late 19th century and the emergence of museum anthropology and European ethnography, oral traditions and traditional knowledge have been collected hand-in-hand with material representations.

In *Intangible Heritage and the Museum*, Marilena Alivizatou presents five intensely in-depth case studies of museums around the globe which have embraced anew the representation of the intangible and the tangible. In doing so, Alivizatou attempts to discern new perspectives in museology. The five museums under consideration are Te Papa Tongarewa, in Wellington, New Zealand; Vanuatu Cultural Centre, in Port Vila; The National Museum of the American Indian, in Washington, D.C. and New York; the Horniman Museum, in London; and the Musée du quai Branly, in Paris. Each of these institutions brings distinct histories, collections, exhibitions and programmes and audiences. Alivizatou's analysis is derived from the growing point of view that museums are archives of culture as well as emergent social spaces.

Central to this volume is the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. A growing number of international conferences and publications have taken place or been produced under the aegis of intangible cultural heritage, notably

the 2004 ICOM General Conference in Seoul and this publication. This book joins the growing literature. In the first chapter, Alivizatou discusses the history of the *Convention* as well as problems associated with it, especially the seeming contradiction of the appellation 'masterpieces' when applied to folk culture. She also sets the stage for the in-depth case studies by providing brief discussions of museum practices common in the past with regards to intangible heritage. This narrative is followed by a more detailed discussion of the role of UNESCO in defining intangible heritage and shaping present-day museum perspectives and practices with regards to intangible heritage.

Between 2006 and 2008, Alivizatou carried out intensive and extensive research which took her around the globe. The case studies which make up the body of this volume are the result of her work. Each chapter starts with a synopsis of the origins and development of the institution discussed. The political, cultural context associated with the founding and changes of each are detailed. Observation and in-depth interviews with staff members also contribute to her analysis. A heavy descriptive narrative guides the reader through exhibits at each museum presenting visualisations of the displays as well as the rationale behind the choice of artifacts and textual content.

Her discussion of Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand's national museum, emphasises the museum's approach to bi-culturalism upon which all functions of the institution are based. Successes and problems associated

with this approach are addressed. The history of the establishment of the museum from the legal background to the development of exhibits is traced.

Te Papa, according to Alivizatou, seeks to be a national dialogue space in which the history of the past is discussed and elaborated upon. The multi-vocal approach, fully incorporating different voices from the Maori communities including the revival of traditions, has created a charged political space.

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre is not a collections-based museum. According to Alivizatou, it is an example of an indigenous museum, *an alternative museological model* (p.75). It serves as a cultural centre at which identity is strengthened and validated. Intangible heritage at this institution is presented in a local context for a local audience and shows traditional processes which also have an impact in local and national development.

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) is presented as a living memorial *in the context of the dynamic between the living and the dead ...* (p.105). Like the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, exhibits, programmes and collections storage at NMAI are developed and delivered with active participation from Native communities, where Alivizatou emphasises the primary role that Native scholarship and point of view takes in these aspects of the museum.

The role of intangible heritage at London's Horniman Museum is viewed from the perspective of museum practices of the last one hundred years, in other words the interpretation of material culture. Alivizatou documents that the concept of intangible heritage associated with artifacts has expanded in recent years to include different forms of traditional knowledge. Staff members have worked with members of immigrant communities in London to collect this material. Intangible heritage, however, continues to be considered as supplementary with the collection taking the forefront.

At the Musée du quai Branly, Alivizatou found exhibitions in which the rich display of material culture is separate and distinct from any media representations of intangible heritage. Although a multiplicity of interpretive approaches and a broad cross-section of themes are presented in the permanent and temporary exhibitions, the focus remains upon the artwork.

Alivizatou's goal in the publication is to *provide a critical examination of intangible heritage on both conceptual and practical levels.* (p.16) She also explores the transformation of museum practices especially from the point of view of cultural preservation. Both of these are accomplished. In general, Alivizatou's detailed case studies fall into two camps. On the one hand, the first three museums, regardless of their scale, have adopted the perspective of empowering communities by reviving, revitalising and supporting the continuity of traditional knowledge, or intangible heritage, in a context which emphasises material culture. In the two European museums studied, she considers that intangible heritage is still viewed as part of non-European traditions, even though the demographics of their communities have changed radically in the past years.

It is good to see this work in print. Over the past eight years, I've had the opportunity to hear the ambitious author present sections of the work in progress at several different international museum meetings. *Intangible Heritage and the Museum* provides an excellent overview of the concept of intangible heritage from the perspective of museology. It is a good text for use in numerous museum studies, material culture, ethnography and other university courses. 📖

