

# Interview with Klaus Staubermann

Dr. Klaus Staubermann is CEO of International Council of Museums (ICOM), Germany and a historian of science. The interview was conducted on February 12 2020 in the premises of the National Center for Biological Sciences, Bengaluru during the Winter School in Public History, February 10 – 21 2020. At the winter school, Dr Staubermann gave a talk titled Object Lives and Reconstructions: How museums can bring the past to life?

The interviewers were Dr. Srijan Sandip Mandal and Dr. Siddhi Bhandari, who are on the faculty of the Centre of Public History, Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology.

SSM: Thank you so much Dr Staubermann for agreeing to let us interview you today. This interview is for the in-house Srishti journal called UnBound and the transcript will be published in the special issue that we are planning to bring out around the theme of this Winter School in Public History, which is The Public Lives of Objects. Today is the 12th of February, Wednesday and the time is 1:15 pm.

What do you think the study of objects can do for the larger and broader study of history?

KS: Objects help us to make sense of the world because they are expressions of knowledge, of skills, also of meanings and thereby in which our understanding of the world rests. When a historian of science writes or explores the past, objects become witnesses of this historic knowledge, historic skills and their meaning. This is why they are extremely important. Think differently if we would focus on archives and documents and records alone it would be a very selective history because only what has been recorded in words or pictures would be used for writing history of science. That's why the three-dimensional witnesses - the objects are so important.

SB: If you could elaborate on how one selects objects to understand history? Are all objects equally important?

KS: The process is that when you work in a museum, objects get collected by a museum and the museum tries to create a fair representation of the past through its collections. Objects are used for storytelling in the museum, so they are about the relevance for people and communities in the past. They are also tools for telling history in the museum. So that is the other aspect and you try and collect a fair representation of the past, but you also see and decide what objects are suitable for telling the stories you want to tell in the museum context. Often these can be the same, sometime, they can vary.

SB: In your talk, there is something you referred to as alive objects. Could you elaborate on that and also to point out whether it is the utility value of an object that make it alive or does it have other connotations as well?

KS: Life means anime, as in animated, and of course that refers largely to the making and to the usage of the artefact. So when an artefact is in the process of being made or is in the process of being used, there can be some overlap here. This is what I would consider to be alive. Of course some objects are functional objects and then animating objects, meaning making objects work is mechanical, what can be optical if it is a telescope or relate to other senses. Of course there is also a dimension that goes beyond this and it is about meaning and the meaning of an object within a society, within a culture, its political meaning and this is where the concept of the living object

becomes more troublesome, I'd say. Not impossible, not difficult, but troublesome, because if you place an object, especially if it is a static object out of one cultural context into another cultural context, then bringing the object alive in this new context will get a completely different and much more complex dimension. For example, a ritual object.

SB: In your talk, you also referred to thinginess of objects. In what sense do you use the term, which can be equally vague and specific? Could you elaborate on it?

KS: It's a term I introduced in a moment where I asked myself how much of what I do with the object is dependent on the object itself and is possibly in the object because we are actors. Objects are objects but can, for example, objects become actors, can they act back on us? For example, you interact with a robot, the robot has some knowledge which is not necessarily real knowledge but knowledge someone has programmed into the robot, but this is where objects become actors, and this is what I call, very lightly and tongue-in-cheek, the thinginess. It is something that is more than an object, it's something that I experience because of the design or the function of the object. It can be the aura of an object I experience, for example. And this is what I then would call the thinginess.

SB: With respect to live objects, what is the impulse to reconstruct objects, especially if we are saying that objects are anyway informative of particular culture(s) and society(ies), yet the need to go back in time and reconstruct something?

KS: Initially you want to see how it worked or if it worked at the time. This can be household items, there are archaeologists who replicate flint stone making because they want to know what it takes to produce a flint stone, how to use a flint stone. It can be very complex objects like people replicating a Viking sail ship and sailing it all the way from Denmark through the Atlantic to the United States. This is about the technical and the material aspect of the Viking ship. You go into the forest, you have to select the trees for the wood, from the wood you collect you develop an idea of what dimensions the boat would have, you build it, you tinker, you experiment, you problem solve, you overcome challenges and problems, you have to train a crew, you have to get it into the water, you have to get the sails up, you have to get it through the storm. So that's what is driving people like me who are mainly interested in history of science and technology. It goes a little further than that as in if you only want to feel or see if it works that's experimental history or archaeology. What I would call experiential, as in you build an experience is different as in you experience something and you try and make sense of your experience and see if you can use this as an interpretive tool for writing history. So is there something in your experience that helps you to better understand the historic source that can maybe even offer some insight that helps you to find an unexpected story or approach in the sources. This is very much about the history of science and technology. If you go into cultural artefacts that have a much broader cultural dimension this takes you into their making and the uses. If they have a deeply religious component, for example, the whole matter becomes much more complex of course. Think of a prayer ball you would have used in a temple or a church, it is

not about the function of the ball anymore. It is about the whole ritual and the cultural context it is used in and to recreate this has certain limitations, of course.

SSM: Would you make a distinction between a historian of science and technology studying objects and an archaeologist studying objects or artefacts of maybe a much earlier time? Is there a distinction or is the distinction just in our heads?

KS: I would not say they are the same, but there are a lot of similarities. It starts from finding an artefact, an object. It can be a water vessel, for example, in an early context, in which case it will be an archaeological artefact, but it can also be a microscope, or a musical instrument. Usually how we distinguish between history and archaeology is that archaeology is about the period when there are no written records in existence or available, and once the written records enter we consider it history. But this is an artificial boundary because of course we can do archaeology from periods where texts were available and equally we can have historic artefacts without any written contexts. So, most of these distinctions I would consider artificial distinctions. Needless to add, the less context you have available, for example if you don't have written context available, the more space for interpretation there is and the more critically conscious the historian needs to be. But there is no intrinsic contradiction between these two.

SSM: Is that a view that is widely shared in the field that you identify with or would you say that you are in a minority?

KS: I'd say it's a view that is shared, maybe not widely shared but you look at, for example the discipline of experimental archaeology and experiential or experimental archaeologists are people who rebuild boats and they rebuild boats on historic finds. But they also rebuild boats based on drawings and textual evidence and then they try to get these boats to work. This is the traditional experimental archaeological discipline. This is what people have been doing for at least a 100 years. Historians who do experimental history, for example using and rebuilding historic artefacts, that's a relatively new discipline. That's about a generation old, maybe twenty-five years. But the methods are again quite similar - you/we create the material evidence, you/we create the artefact, you try to situate your personal experiences in a wider context, that wider context could be a textual context you match with the records and the documents you have at hand. So, that's a view that I'd say is shared within the community. Of course, you can take both aspects to extremes and then you create contradictions. These are more manmade than intrinsic.

SSM: There has been a lot of talk in academia about decolonization which has now become a subfield called 'decolonisation studies'. Decolonisation as also entered museum practice. Is decolonization in some ways different from debate on repatriation and ownership or is it a subset of that debate?

KS: They are very closely related and cannot be separated because every practice that is debated in the context of decolonization needs to have the possibility at least of repatriation where needed. So one cannot be separated from the other. Of course you get some scenarios, for example, academics debate decolonization in a university context where there is no museum or collection. On the other hand, you might find objects in museums that require repatriation, like human remains for example, without the colonial context. But the question of ownership needs to be discussed within museums and always with the express willingness of the museums or whoever holds the collection, to return where needed.

SSM: Because we have been talking about objects, and objects in museums and museums collecting those objects, I wanted to get your opinion on the debate now around who owns these objects? Especially in colonial museums like the British museum and especially for objects like the Koh-i-noor which although is not in the British museum but still is in British possession that India claims as its own, Pakistan claims as its own, Afghanistan claims as its own. And the British museum says that because of its location in a metropolitan city like London which is far more accessible than any other place in the world and because it has the expertise to take care of them and do the right thing by them that it somehow be allowed to keep the object as opposed to repatriate it. As a museum professional and CEO of ICOM, Germany, I was hoping if you could shed some light on that?

KS: That is a very powerful question because if you speak about ownership, you need to define ownership. You can start with legal ownership, in which case you would say the museum is a public institution and its owned by the taxpayer. But as I explained earlier, every object has a history and it is not just about the here and now, it is about the past. The past determines what we do with objects and how objects are treated and perceived. This can be a very complex history, objects change hands and are often obtained under very complex circumstances. There is no easy way out from either end to resolve these issues. There is no general solution to these issues. It needs to be resolved on an object by object case, and it needs to be resolved on a high level. You need to get the people involved around a table. Its not something that can be resolved by a directive in a museum or a government policy. This is an issue that in Germany is very big at the moment because of Germany's colonial past, for example Africa or Asia, but also because of the Nazi regime where a lot of people got disowned. Quite a few historic witnesses are still living and their number gets smaller and the pressure is on museums to respond and to resolve these issues. Also, more recently, what is considered the Soviet occupation of eastern Germany where people have had to leave the country and were disowned and objects were transferred to museum collections and again these museums have a responsibility to resolve these issues. As I said before, repatriation is not always the ideal and you will hear this from both sides - the people who claim the objects and the people who currently own the objects. As you address me as a museum professional, and I am speaking very practically here now, long term loans can offer interim solutions. For example, if one museum owns an objects but feels that it shouldn't own it because of its colonial past but there is no scenario yet at the receiving end of what should be done with the object, one can have an intermediary solution which is a long term loan. This is where we need global ways forward, for example something which is called government indemnity, which means governments agree that the object is safe or protected in

all involved museums. This is something ICOM is proactively working on because one cannot from one moment to another return all collections to their rightful owners. It's a long a long and complex process, but I fully understand that museums in cultures that have been looted or deprived of their heritage in other ways can feel that they should own these objects, should be given the possibility to exhibit them and present them to the public. Here, a long term loan based on government indemnity, might offer an intermediate possible solution.

SSM: So effectively this requires cooperation at the government level and then percolate down to museum to museums relationships for it to work.

KS: It needs people to talk on all kinds of levels, it needs governments to talk, it needs museum practitioners to talk, it needs communities to talk. And they are not always the same people. Neither do they always operate in the interest of these people. You need good dialogues, eye level dialogue on all kinds of levels. Then you work towards a solution that is of mutual satisfaction.

SB: To go back to the idea, rather the practicality of reconstruction. Could you talk about how the public responds to the reconstructed objects? You have spoken about the need for reconstructing objects and its need for various reasons, but how does the public, to whom the reconstructed object is displayed respond to them?

KS: Oh, the public usually loves it because they love action. They like reenactment of all sorts, they like air shows with historic planes or they like to dress up for events in historic costumes. For museums, this (reconstruction) is a very powerful tool for outreach and connecting collections and the public. There are limitation, of course: I don't agree that it is the most sensible way to recreate a historic battle in a museum, this will feel more than a nostalgic experience, but in reality it is about suffering, it is about death and loss. So this needs to be seen with caution. But everything else we create, like preparing historic food based on old cooking recipes, can be very popular. So it is a very powerful tool in the hands of museums.

SSM: So you would not consider historic reenactments of a battle or of any historical event, you wouldn't club that with reconstructions because it has other ethical dilemmas surrounding it that reconstruction may not necessarily have?

KS: Yes, one needs to spell out what one expects from the experience. Is it about, for example, how to create a mutual battle formation with a group of people, were they able to carry their gear, were they suitably adapted to the environment. These are questions one can rightfully answer with a reconstruction. But the more complex, especially the emotional experience that comes with war, the more challenging it could become to reconstruct it in a museum space.

SB: You have also spoken about the idea of museums as spaces where objects are co-created. How much, do you feel as CEO of ICOM Germany, has been done towards co-creation? At what level are the museums - are museums still communicating or have moved towards co-creation?

KS: It varies very much with the museums and ICOM very much emphasizes the autonomy of the museums. So there is no ICOM answer, here is a Klaus Staubermann answer. My answer is that ideally a museum, because it is a public institution, should be by the public and for the public. An exhibition should be done through public consultation and it should be created in response to the public. This can be achieved at various levels like consultancy exercises or even public events where one invites people in to comment on the planning. There can be sections in exhibitions where the public can contribute or be consulted. There is no limit to this but needless to say doing this requires extra work and museums have limited resources. There will always be the question of who facilitates the process. But ideally when you do an exhibition of gallery development in a museum, you should get the public, in this case the intended audience should get involved as quickly as possible also to avoid later disillusionment or disappointment. Because if you invest a lot of money and work in an exhibition and you figure its not working, that's not a nice thing for a museum to experience.

SB: Because this winter school is in Public History, and when we say Public History we imagine the involvement of the public at the level of collection of data and also towards its dissemination. Do you see reconstruction or co-creation as tools that Public History can use more actively?

KS: Absolutely, there is a lot of potential for Public History in museums. When you work in a museum space, you can also work with the public collecting stories, thereby building historic and contemporary knowledge for the museum and enlighten the museum's collections and you can in turn much better produce history for the public. It is about working with the public and for the public. And this is what Public History does. So, I think, any space where people meet and interact with artefacts, it doesn't necessarily need to be a museum, it can be such a space.

I was mentioning this in our discussion two days ago, when I worked as a curator in Scotland and Scotland was very badly hit by the economic crisis of 2008, many shops closed. The city council decided to keep some of these shops open as meeting spaces for communities. People, especially elder people who needed an incentive to go out, could bring objects and collectibles and talk about them. And then museums got involved and tried to capture these stories and feed them into their collections. So there is a lot of potential for Public History as well as museums, especially for the museum as an interface between the public and the historic collections.

SSM: Thank you so much, Dr Staubermann, for your time and for doing this with us. Thanks a lot again.

SB: Or anything else you would like to say?

KS: Keep me updated about how your Centre develops because from what I have seen on your website, you guys are doing amazing work and proactively working with museums and artefacts. I think this would add a lot not just to your work, but also for the museum community as a whole because you are very progressive and what you produce could become a major step forward for everyone.