

Some educational remarks on museum education

Luxor, April 1995

© Helmut Danner

The background for the following remarks is educational. My personal background is philosophical foundations of education. As such, I am convinced that it is necessary to reflect the basis of any educational field - such as museum education - in order to clarify what the basis of our educational actions is. At the same time, I am aware that such a reflection provides only a limited directly practical contribution.

In a first part, I intend to ask for the *task* of museum education; in a second part I will focus on the *educational aspect*; and finally I will try to derive some *theses* from that educational task.

I. The task

In modern history, museums have become a relatively young expression of human life. They have two aspects: They are a *collection* of a certain area to document something of cultural importance. Collections have originally been private and can still be private. The second aspect is that museums are collections for the *public*. These two elements: collection of an area of cultural value as well as being offered to the public, are the elements of the *task* of a museum. Cultural collection and public are to come together, and even more than that: they have to be *mediated* to each other. The task of a museum is the mediation of a cultural collection and the public. This is an *educational task*. Mentioning education, we have to realize that education is not only related to children, but also to adults.

This may sound very abstract. I try to elaborate this thought through a famous word by the German poet *Goethe*:

"Was du ererbest von deinen Vätern, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen."

In English translation:

"What you inherit from your fathers, acquire it to possess it."

Superficially taken, this word does not make sense. For, why shall I acquire or even buy something which I have inherited already? It already belongs to my possession, so, why to pay again for it? For sure, Goethe knew this, too. Therefore, we have to look more carefully for the meaning of his word.

The three main statements of Goethe's word are: to inherit, to acquire, and to possess. When we relate the *heritage* to our topic, i.e. to museums, then the heritage comprises the goods and traditions which stem from ancient times, from technical developments, art, other peoples, etc. These traditions and goods of culture and civilization are supposed to be present in a museum. Museums document the heritage. So far, the heritage is present.

But Goethe demands from us that we *acquire* the heritage. Obviously,

the pure presence is not enough. For example, is this not true for Egypt and demonstrated by the average Egyptian? There exists the richest history over thousands of years, beautiful and impressive documents in buildings, artefacts, organized society and religious belief. But who cares? Who is interested? Not the modern Egyptians are on the sites of antiquities; these are the foreigners. The presence of heritage is not sufficient; it needs the *active* participation, the activity of the individual. On the other hand, a museum has to make the heritage available for the public; the average citizen needs a good *presentation* of the exhibits. In this respect, the museum of Luxor is without any doubt much better than the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. But a good example for *guidance*, for instance, is the Official Catalogue of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Another criterion for good presentation is the skilful *selection* of exhibits by an expert in addition to a calm presentation which invites to meditation.

The active participation in the heritage by the citizen must be supported by the museum. However, acquiring the heritage must not be mixed up with *information*. This is the fatal misunderstanding of Egyptian schools. They feed the children with information, with superficial data about - for example - history. The result is that those children later as adults will be fed-up of history; they will be bored, and will even hate it.

Acquiring the heritage must be more than 'information'; it requires *encounter* with it. Museums have to *arrange* the encounter; they have to give the chance for it, and maybe, they can encourage it. However, again, they cannot make the encounter happen; only the active participation of the individual is the key to real encounter.

This brings us back to the individual who *actively* addresses his/her heritage. In which way has he/she to be active? There must be, first of all, a personal *question*, a curiosity. We can also call it a *motivation* or an interest.

Is an interest sufficient? We know that a superficial interest may quickly disappear; therefore, it must be serious. The more serious and the deeper a motivation is the more powerful and sustainable it will be in order to bring individual and heritage together. For example, different grades of seriousness may be expressed in the following questions: Who was Ekhнатon? - Why was he important? - What was his monotheistic teaching? - Did Ekhнатon influence the monotheistic religions? - Are there religious elements of our present days which trace back to Ekhнатon? The more we are able and ready to relate our heritage to our present or even personal situation, the deeper and the more *existential* our questions are, the more are we ready to encounter a historic figure etc.

But we have still to admit that a genuine motivation and an existential question does not automatically provide an encounter with the subject matter. I can be highly motivated, but I am not able to come closer to the matter of interest, because I don't have the right *approach* to it.

An example from quite a different context may give us a hint for a fruitful approach: Some days ago, German friends asked me in front of a tree which

kind it was. I told them spontaneously: It is called 'román' in Arabic. And I was searching for the translation. Next came to my mind the English name: 'pomegranate'. Still I was desperate to give the German word; only after a long while I could tell them: 'Granatapfel'. I am German, I should really know my language better. What had happened? 'Granatapfel' is an exotic fruit in Germany; you may hear about it in a fairy tale, for example, or maybe you see a picture in a biology book. The Arabic word 'román', however, has an *alive* reference for me; I learned it in front of a tree itself - asking "which tree is this?" - seeing it, noticing its tender shape and fine leaves - comparing it with trees which I had known before. This little experience of learning an Arabic word was no pure 'information' for me; it was more. It was an alive situation, created by my interest, involving my senses, referring to my experience. Compared to this, 'information' often is only an intellectual transfer of abstract data; in the context of 'information', the human being is often mis-understood as a computer which can store and deliver some data.

The example with the word 'román' demonstrates, that an existential acquirement is not only based on motivation, but also on the involvement of the *senses*. Also 'information' needs eyes and ears, however, in a very superficial way, just for the transfer of abstract knowledge. A real involvement of our eyes would mean, for example, to watch and compare the Upper and Lower Egyptian pharaonic crowns carefully and to *draw* them. Who has drawn them has a different kind of 'knowledge' than the one who has read a description in a book. The more senses are actively involved the more existential is the encounter with a subject matter. Drawing is only one simple possibility of involving the senses. It can also be painting, forming in clay, in paper, other materials, describing it in words and by this reflecting on it; it can be a role play or dramatic performance. Thus, in manifold forms our senses can be activated in order to take - so to speak - the subject matter in our hands and not only into our brain.

So far, we can reformulate Goethe's word in a new way:

What is presented to you as your heritage, actively acquire and encounter it with all your senses in order to possess it.

In which way can we '*possess*' an inherited subject matter? Goethe, of course, does not mean the materialistic possession. This would be too primitive, too 'nouveau rich'. The Egyptians possess the most wonderful historic heritage - but have they, as a people, acquired it? Do they possess it in a non-materialistic way? What is the non-materialistic possession which Goethe may have meant? Is it knowledge; is it thorough knowledge which is more than pure information which we have acquired with personal motivation and sensual participation? Is this already 'possession' in the sense which Goethe had in mind?

Knowledge may still be superficial; it can be *l'art pour l'art* and as such even boring. However, our heritage becomes an exciting and real possession, when it is *related to me*, to my life; when it has *meaning for me*. Which meaning

does Ekhnaton's religious ideology, his genius political deed, have for me today, for my personal life? Maybe, it has none at all? At first, do *I understand* it? If there would be no more a direct meaning for me, *to where* do I have to put this religious teaching - for me, for my culture? How do I justify my decision that it still has a meaning or none? In this way, that antique idea is referred to the *context* of my life and to the contemporary time; it has something to do with my existence today - even in its total strangeness.

This kind of reflection - putting knowledge into a relationship to myself and into a context of my life - is called in German '*Auseinandersetzung*'. I do not know an English equivalent for this expression; it means a critical reflection and discussion of a subject matter with personal involvement and decision - a decision for or against the subject matter which is based on reasons and arguments.

For example, my personal reflected relationship as a layman to the pharaonic heritage is as follows: Gradually I have learned to see the *beauty* of the artifacts, the statues, reliefs, drawings and paintings in tombs, etc.; but still there is a gap, they are alien to me although some things are quite familiar to me by seeing them many times. I have some *knowledge* about the religious teachings, the myths, the gods and goddesses, the symbols; etc.; but here, the distance to me, to my own interpretation of life is even much bigger. At the same time, I am *fascinated* by the philosophical and cultural importance which the pharaonic spiritual world still has for us, as via the Greek philosophy and the Greek influence on Christianity the scheme of a world here and a world beyond it, a life here and a life after death, the splitting of a person in body and soul, has still some validity today.

2. Museum education

So far, we have only described the *task* of museum education. We can summarize it with the interpreted word by Goethe:

What is presented to you as your heritage, actively acquire and encounter it with all your senses in order to possess it by critically discussing it and relating it to your own situation.

But how can this be realized? What is the *educational way* to fulfill this task? If museums would want to be more than scientific collections of cultural heritage, than they have to take over the described educational task of helping the individual to get into 'possession' of his/her heritage.

When this is true, then we have to clarify, first of all, what we should understand as *education*. It is *not* Egyptian school education. Who knows it will easily understand that the demands which derive from Goethe's word cannot be satisfied by the understanding of education in Egyptian schools. This is based on memorizing of 'information'. There is no independent, discovering thinking. For, learning by heart means: listening to the teacher, believing what he and books are maintaining. There is no critical reflection, no use of senses.

But education which is demanded here is also *broader than school education* in European understanding. It is a general misunderstanding that education has to be exclusively referred to schools. *Education* how we mean it here is much broader. There are children on the one hand and, on the other hand, mothers, fathers, the whole family, kindergartens, special education for children with disabilities, youth groups; there is learning with adults; etc. Everywhere happens education but often in quite different forms than in school. What is education then?

One crucial criterion of education is certainly that there is a specific *relationship*; we can call it an educational relationship between a person who is guiding and helping and another one who is receiving guidance and help. The educational relationship differs from family to school and to adult education. A museum should provide guidance and support in a specific way. The question rises here, whether museum education can rely on abstract support through leaflets and other information systems or whether *persons* have to take over the educational support of the public.

Another criterion of education is *mediation*. The purpose of the educational relationship is that child and surrounding world are brought together in a way that the child creates a relationship to this world and the world is no more alien to him/her. In school this happens in a systematic way; mediation in the family occurs more subtle, indirectly, unsystematically; the close relationship between parents and child has the character to build trust in the child to the world. The mediation which a museum has to achieve concerns a certain area of the world, e.g. the mediation between children and the pharaonic world. How does the mediation for children differ from that for adults?

Up to now we did not question that the educational task of a museum which can be concluded from Goethe's word is justified. Why to put all that load on a museum? There is an answer which comes from the German concept of 'education'. We lay an emphasis on the 'educated', 'cultured' person. The process to and the status of the 'cultured person' is called '*Bildung*'. Education is supposed to lead to '*Bildung*'. It includes the critical discussion of the encountered world and strives for critical knowledge. As such *Bildung* is the life-long endeavour to see the personal existence in the context of the surrounding world. Related to the pharaonic world, this means: *to understand myself on the background of history*.

3. Some theses

I try to formulate some theses which derive from the above and which may be considered as an educational guideline for museum education.

(1) Museums should support the process of '*Bildung*', the encounter between individual and history, technology, etc. Their guidance should 'open the eyes' of their visitors.

(2) The presentation should happen in a clear, calm, *non-distractive* environ-

ment.

(3) The selection of the exhibits should follow the principle of the '*exemplaric*'. A few things can represent something characteristic and typical. The life of one pharao can stand for many.

(4) For educational purposes, the principle of the exemplaric is more fruitful than scientific system of an *encyclopedia*.

(5) At the same time, a presentation of the *context* is necessary.

(6) The *encounter* between individual and the exhibit should be facilitated.

(7) *Information* is necessary, but it should be *exceeded* by stimulation of questions, discovery, and personal activity.

(8) The arrangement of exhibits should offer as many opportunities as possible for involvement of the *senses*.

(9) Also, *critical reflection* should be stimulated.

(10) The critical reflection should aim to a confrontation of the historic matter with the contemporary and *personal situation* - wherever this makes sense.

(11) Museum education has the goal of supporting the process of '*Bildung*', i.e. the 'cultured person'.

(12) Guiding *adults* and supporting *children* are different tasks.

(13) *Children have to be taken seriously as persons*. Their specific developmental stage has to be respected. This stage is shown in the way of thinking and perceiving, in the relationship to reality and fantasy, in the growing ability for abstraction. Principally children are curious; they want to discover; and they have questions.

(14) Without being childish, children have to be met in an *adequate way*, i.e. they need to use their hands and their senses and to play as a suitable means for discovery.

(15) The museum educators should guide and stimulate the children; but the *activities* have to be put into the *children's hands*.