Presentations of war and violence in museums generally oscillate between the fascination of terror and its instruments and the didactic urge to explain violence and, by analysing it, make it easier to handle and prevent. The museums concerned also have to face up to these basic issues about the social and institutional handling of war and violence. Does war really belong in museums? And if it does, what objectives and means are involved? Can museums avoid trivializing and aestheticising war, transforming violence, injury, death and trauma into tourist sights? What images of shock or identification does one generate – and what images would be desirable?

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Does War Belong in Museums?
The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions

WOLFGANG MUCHITSCH

In 2011, the Universalmuseum Joanneum, Austria’s oldest and second largest museum complex, celebrated its 200th anniversary. In preparation of this special event, we decided to dedicate each month of the year 2011 to one of our museums. Thus the focus in September 2011 was on the Landeszeughaus, the Styrian Armoury, considered to be the world’s largest historic armoury and one of the most important monuments of Styrian history.

Built by the Styrian Diet between 1642 and 1645, the building was the most important armoury in the south-east of the Habsburg Empire and played a crucial role in the defence of the Austrian frontier provinces of Styria, Carinthia and Carniola against the threat of attack from Ottoman armies and Hungarian anti-Habsburg rebels.

When under the reign of Maria Theresa (1740-1780) the Austrian military administration was reformed and centralized in Vienna, the empress resolved to give up all armouries in the Austrian provinces and in 1749 she proposed to the estates that they relinquish all usable weapons to the war ministry and sell all obsolete arms as scrap metal. The Styrian Diet objected and argued that in addition to its material value, the armoury had symbolic importance, for it was dear to them as a memorial to the history of their country and to the valour of their forefathers. Maria Theresa, not wanting to offend the Styrians unnecessarily and respecting their tradition of defending the frontiers, allowed them to keep the armoury.1

Since 1880, the armoury has been open to the public and in 1892 became part of the Styrian State Museum Joanneum, now the Universalmuseum Joanneum. Seeing as the Landeszeughaus itself is a unique historical monument with its historic building and its collection of about 32,000 objects and due to the fact that there is no

space there for temporary exhibitions, we agreed on two special projects for the 200
year anniversary of the Joanneum:

The first project is an art project in public space dealing with the question of
Graz as a “bulwark” against the East. An international jury chose the project “The
Unknown Knight” by the Turkish artist Nasan Tur.

And, as a second project, we invited the Museum Academy of the Universalmu-
seum Joanneum as well as ICOMAM, the International Council of Museums and
Collections of Arms and Military History to organize a joint international confer-
ce on the fundamental question posed in the title of the conference: “Does War
Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions”.

More or less every museum is at one time or another confronted with displaying
topics of war and violence. And, in most cases, the presentations of war and violence
oscillate between, on the one hand, the fascination of terror and its instruments, and
on the other hand the didactic urge to explain violence and, by analyzing it, make it
easier to come to terms with or prevent.

When dealing with topics of war and violence, museum professionals have to
consider questions such as: What objectives and means are involved when they pres-
ent war in museums? How can they avoid trivializing or aestheticizing war? How can
they avoid, for example, in the case of the Landeszeughaus, transforming violence,
injury, death and trauma into main tourist attractions? What images of consterna-
tion, shock and horror do they generate? What can they make accessible in terms of
understanding the dialectic of friend and foe? Do they frighten off, warn, ponder,
shock, emotionally manipulate, compare, historicize and/or promote learning?

The call for papers for this conference was more than successful, receiving more
than 80 proposals for papers from colleagues from all over the world, which made it
difficult to choose only 17 for reasons of time. Therefore, we would like to apologize
to all colleagues whose papers could not be accepted.

The conference started with a most inspiring key-note by the Yale historian Jay
Winter, who, on the one hand, gave an overview on the history of war and military
museums since the First World War and, on the other hand, stressed one of the main
dilemmas of war and military museums, namely that especially those dedicated to
the history of the 20th century have to serve as museums as well as memorials at the
same time. Winter pointed out that war dominates museum space in representing
history, but that all war museums fail to represent war and that they are never politi-
cally neutral as the conference showed later on. On the contrary, one has to ask who
owns the memory of war. For Winter, war museums are important steps on the map
of remembrance, which should avoid the fetishisation and glorification of war. This
can be achieved by offering a series of alternative ways of approaching the terror of
the battlefield and by changing the gender balance of representations of populations
at war. For Jay Winter war museums are sites of contestation and interrogation,

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2 | For more details, see the paper of Werner Fenz in this volume.
which should also link their visitors with the numerous sites of memory that the
violence of the two world wars and later conflicts have produced around us.

“If War Does Belong to Museums: How?” was the question to which the follow-
ing speakers responded. Peter Armstrong, director of the Royal Armouries in Leeds,
focused on the question of whether a national museum like the Royal Armouries
can act as an agent of social change and make a positive impact on individual lives.
He highlighted the museum’s program of using its collection to work within the
communities, especially since the UK’s law banning the use of hand guns and the
carrying of knives.

Barton C. Hacker gave an overview of the development of the military collec-
tions within the Smithsonian Institution and the US and stressed that the military
museum exhibitions have undergone a major shift from the 1980s onwards as they
began to draw on military social history with its stress on the common soldier, the
experience of war and the place of the armed forces in society.

Focusing on the topic of “Displaying War”, Gorch Pieken from the newly opened
Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden gave a virtual tour through the
largest military history museum and its new extension by the American architect
Daniel Libeskind, which tries to break new ground. Full of contrasts and with a
Libeskind architectural extension, which is an object in its own right, the museum
tries to combine a chronological as well as a thematic approach, using interventions
by renowned contemporary artists as well as personal memories and biographies.
The multiperspectivity of the permanent exhibition with its branching out into so-
cial history and cultural history offers many ways to interpret German military his-
tory while focusing on the human being and the anthropological side of violence.
On a similar but smaller scale, Ralf Raths from the German Tank Museum in Mun-
ster described the dilemma he has been facing. Since 2008 he has been trying to
transform a traditional museum that specializes in huge pieces of military equip-
ment and is situated in a town dominated by its military complexes into a more criti-
cal contextualization to counteract the strong technical aura and the fetishisation
of the objects. The new concept aims to deconstruct convenient myths. It sees the
objects as opportunities to not only expand the scope of the historical context, but
also to focus on the human experience, a process which has sparked heated debates
and criticism from various sides. Christian Ortner from the Heeresgeschichtliches
Museum Vienna offered an insight into the changes of the history and the structure
of his institution.

Under the title “The Beauty of War and the Attractivity of Violence” more ex-
amples of current museum work were provided by Carol Nater from the Museum
Altes Zeughaus in Solothurn, who presented the concept for the new permanent
exhibition. This was followed by three colleagues from the educational service of
the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History in Brussels, who in
their programs try to explain mainly to children and adolescents that war is not a
game. They try to make children ponder and reflect by drawing their attention to the
realities and impacts of war. Per Björn Redkal from the Museum of Cultural History at the University of Oslo presented a temporary exhibition project about weapons as aesthetic objects and the beauty of war, combining fascination, beauty, war and ambiguity. This session ended with Susanne Hageman from Berlin who did a survey of 40 German city museums and how they deal with the Second World War and the destruction of German cities through air raids. The different approaches where illustrated by a “canonical” object: the bomb.

How the trauma of war and violence can be part of the object was illustrated by Robert M. Ehrenreich, whose institution, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is unique in that it is one of the few institutions that focus primarily on non-combatants. Through the use of artefacts that were prized and protected by Jews fleeing the annihilation, the museum tries to effectively transmit the experiences of the Jewish population during the Holocaust. Alexandra Bounia from Cyprus has done a case study on how five war-related museums in the divided South and North Cyprus communities and countries use the perceived objectivity of museums and photography as a means to construct strong narratives within museums to form and reinforce official historical narratives, explain violence as a necessary form of sacrifice and construct a sense of national identity and pride. While the photographs and the events depicted are similar, the messages change according to the accompanying text, the context, the museum's central narrative and visitors’ preconceptions. Werner Fenz, former head of the Institute of Art in Public Space in Styria, presented three different projects in Styria, in which contemporary artists had to deal with topics like the Holocaust, the National Socialist regime and Graz as a “bulwark” against the south-east. Similar to Alexandra Bounia’s paper on museums in Cyprus, three more examples in the final session “Military History, War Museums and National Identity” showed how war-related museums, especially in countries where the conflict is still fresh and unresolved, can and are being used and misused to create and influence national identity and how museums, like armies, are instruments and means of politics. Kristiane Janeke presented the new Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk/Belarus. This large-scale museum project, planned for 2013, shows the important role the liberation from the National-Socialist occupation as well as the resistance movement play as the founding myth for a new national identity. The final paper by Patrizia Kern showed the outstanding importance of the Turkish War of Independence within the national imaginary, as well as the role of the military within Turkey’s society and its cultural politics, taking the Atatürk and War of Independence Museum in Ankara, established in 2002, as a case study.

Summing up, the conference provided a vivid picture of the dilemma of war and military museums to present the unpresentable, to exist within the ambiguity of being museums as well as memorials and the necessity of overcoming their national perspectives. Despite lively discussions, the conference, like a good exhibition, left visitors with more questions than answers.
Ladies and gentlemen,
it is my pleasure to welcome you all here in Graz for this thirty second ICOMAM symposium. In 1957, our predecessor, IAMAM, started what has since become a tradition. IAMAM indeed became an official International Committee of ICOM in 2003 and changed its name; the newly constituted ICOMAM perpetuated the tradition. Not bad, for an organization run exclusively by volunteers and representing a network rather than an actual institution! Thirty two congresses, no less: I am so free as to draw your attention to the implications of that figure. It indicates that our association has withstood the test of time, that it has now definitely come of age and that it undoubtedly acquired experience. These thirty two international meetings have, in most cases, led to full-blown publications providing written accounts of the various lectures and papers; some of these proceedings are still available. For the newcomers amongst you I would like to point out that ICOMAM’s fiftieth anniversary in 2007 was, amongst other things, celebrated with a rerun of the most successful contributions in a rather luxurious publication.

The importance of these very accessible meetings in our specific field of interest – military and arms history and museology - cannot be stressed enough. They create close links between institutions and between participants, sometimes even evolving into long and warm friendships. The networking facilities provided by these symposiums also have to be taken into account. The primary aim of these conferences is and remains the exchange of research results, the confrontation of ideas and the critical evaluation of what our colleagues are currently working on. With this in mind, these conferences simply have to reach out to and specifically address young researchers, young museum professionals and young academics. Those at the beginning of their

1 | Until 1999 IAMAM organised only triennial meetings, called Congresses, since then the policy has changed and also annual conferences have been introduced. Taking them all together we come up with a total of thirty two conferences and congresses.

careers often possess a knack for evaluating and approaching our sector with greater open-mindedness and candour. I feel that we should reflect upon ways to motivate young researchers and small institutions to participate in our meetings, especially in these times of financial hardship and budgetary restrictions.

The fact that we assemble in Graz this year is linked to the celebration of another respectable and important jubilee. In 1811, that is to say, 200 years ago, Archduke Johann of Austria, brother of Austrian Emperor Franz I, founded, in collaboration with the Styrian estates, the Styrian State Museum Joanneum here in this town. He saw this as an “inner Austrian national museum” with an extremely varied collection encompassing art, nature, industry, technology and practically all of human activity. The museum was to “bring these things to life so it would make learning easier and stimulate a thirst for knowledge”\(^3\). After several reorganizations, the Universalmuseum Joanneum grew into the largest of its kind in Central Europe, housing more than 4.5 million objects covering the fields of natural history, art, technology and folk culture. The Landeszeughaus, the famous Graz armoury, well known to all weapons historians for its extraordinary collection presented in an exceptional setting, is, of course, older than the Joanneum. The armoury dates back to the middle of the 17th century, when it was constructed to defend the borders against Turkish attacks. However, by the middle of the 19th century, the armoury was incorporated into the Joanneum and thus also plays an active role in the activities organized for this quite festive year.

On behalf of all those present here today and on behalf of the entire ICOMAM family, I would like to congratulate the organizers and especially director Dr. Muchitsch and his team on this special anniversary and this remarkable event. Moreover, I would like to thank him most heartily for presenting ICOMAM with the opportunity of joining in the celebrations organized for this bicentennial. It is both an honour and a pleasure to learn that this conference is on the list of official activities set up by the Joanneum. It is also an honour and a pleasure to spend a few days in this lovely and friendly Graz, to take time to discuss and debate and to discover the many faces of the Joanneum, with the Landeszeughaus as a magnet for all those interested in old weapons and armour. Thank you.

The global theme for this meeting is certainly both inspiring and intriguing. “Does war belong in museums?” It is an open-ended question with a strong philosophical undercurrent, but the subtitle “the representation of violence in exhibitions” definitely paves part of the way. ICOMAM has already taken an interest in exhibition arts and techniques on several occasions in the past, but then tended to focus more specifically on technical matters or actual internal and external transformation processes encountered when refurbishing old museum galleries or old-fashioned presentations. There is one notable exception, although that workshop cannot really be

\(^3\) | Quoted from the website of the Universalmuseum Joanneum: http://www.museum-joanneum.at/en/joanneum/about-the-joanneum
categorized as a pure IAMAM/ICOMAM activity. Indeed, when the former Director of the Legermuseum in Delft, Jan Buijse, retired in 2002, his museum organised a small symposium with the intriguing title “Presenting the Unpresentable. Renewed Presentations in Museums of Military History”. The Legermuseum wanted to open a reflection and a debate on how to think about and deal with the processes of rebuilding and renewing old-fashioned military museums. The Legermuseum therefore invited six directors and staff members of international military museums who had already gone through renewal. Some fundamental and critical questions were put forward. Is there still a need for military museums? What about and how to present the “darker” pages in our national (military) history? How to incorporate more history into military museums? The last question obviously illustrated the (frustrating?) fact that a lot of these old-fashioned military museums were pure object-museums in which war was often reduced to a pure “Materialschlacht” without any human interaction or activity. We will learn more about this soon, as it is the topic of a lecture questioning and explaining how a military museum had for many years been able to speak about war while keeping war completely out of the museum, not in spite of the objects shown, but actually because of them.

The theme of the present conference probes much deeper and is more up to date than ever. What about the phenomenon of war in arms and armour museums and other military museums? How do we deal with violence, with conflict? What about the aggression and exploitation so often linked to war? How can we present an atrocity such as war in an acceptable way and in what kind of a setting, and finally in what kind of museum? For people who have gone through a war, the experience proves extremely traumatic and painful. It has left ineradicable scars. Therefore, war is considered as something to be avoided at all costs, as it invariably leads to human drama, economic upheaval (we will not consider the armament industry) and social


regression. War is synonymous with death, poverty and destruction. But war also gives people the opportunity to rise above themselves. Sacrifice, courage and heroism are also an integral part of the story of war. This makes me say that yes, war indeed has its place in a museum. There is of course no single right and final answer on how to present violence and war in museums. The museums and the collections we represent are so diverse as are our origin, history and mission statements.6

The representation of violence and war situations in showcases and dioramas nevertheless remains extremely risky. The various informative and explanatory texts make clear that there is an unbridgeable gap between the real past and the reconstructed past as it is presented in a museum. Time and again it becomes apparent that it is extremely difficult to reconcile past and present. Rendering the past is and always will be ambivalent. One only has to consider the dangers inherent in the aesthetic presentation of war, and, by extension, of the past. Bringing war to life in a museum (even this can be interpreted in various ways) implies striking a fragile balance between aesthetics and historically accurate representations. No one will blame a curator for selecting an aesthetically pleasing set-up. Of course, the curator wants a nice and attractive place - but the visitor might very well start confusing the aestheticism of the display with an inaccurate view of the past. Aesthetics can lead to wrong conclusions. A fiercely business-like approach (that is, one presenting weapons as purely utilitarian or technical objects, or one that looks at them through the eyes of an engineer) can, however, also lead to these false conclusions. In that way, a streamlined technical presentation can erase the feelings of the past and its sensations, a situation much too common in military museums.

However, and this is perhaps comforting, military museums are not the only ones faced with this double-edged situation. A few years ago, the sociologist of arts and culture, Pascal Gielen, wrote a very interesting book about the presentation, the dangers and the pitfalls of cultural heritage.7 The book neatly ties in with our central theme today. Through different examples, the author demonstrates the dangers of museum displays steeped in nostalgia. Folklore museums are particularly prone to this danger, although museums concerned with agriculture, industrial and economic activities or ethnography are also more or less confronted with the same issue. We all have to avoid over-simplified presentations, because these invariably lead to an overly romanticized image of the past. Gielen cites the example of the representation of a late 19th century schoolroom with its blackboard and children quietly sitting

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6 | See also C. Mardini, What kind of museum for the city of Beirut? s.l.n.d.
7 | Pascal Gielen (2007): De Onbereikbare Binnenkant van het Verleden. Over de Enscenering van het Culturele Erfgoed. Leuven: Lannoo Campus. P. Gielen (1970) is the director of the research center “Arts in Society” at the Groningen University where he is an associate professor of the sociology of art. He also leads the research group and book series ‘Arts in Society’ (Fontys College for the Arts, Tilburg). Gielen has written several books on contemporary art, cultural heritage and cultural politics.
on their benches. This scene could easily lead visitors to believe that life at that time used to be simple and peaceful and could make them forget that that same era was characterized by widespread child labour where learning and going to school were reserved for the happy few, to the economically and sociologically better-off classes. The example shows the dangers of an involuntary romanticizing of the past through museum displays. Museum presentations have to strike a careful balance: the less enjoyable sides of history also have to be put on display, even if this disturbs the romantic and nostalgic images some people love to cultivate. I would like to refer to Pascal Gielen one last time: He also talks about the “unattainable inside of the past”, and especially about how difficult it is to touch the soul of the past in museum presentations. Even re-enactment, which, when it is done well, confronts us with a real-life experience, runs the risk of excessive nostalgia and aestheticism, thus losing touch with the past. This highlights an interesting paradox inherent to each and every well-established museum set-up. An accurate historic framework referring to basic facts, with historic and social contextualisation, is of the essence if only to put the presentation in perspective and to stress that a museum presentation will always be and remain an interpretation. It will always be a contemporary view of the past, a few steps removed from true facts and actual history.

I will limit myself to these few observations for now. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to awaken your curiosity. Just like you, I eagerly await the lecture by the eminent guest speaker, Prof. Jay Winter, who is famous for his innovative research into the First World War. Considering his experience as co-producer, co-writer and chief historian for, amongst others, the successful television documentary about the First World War, *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*, he is undoubtedly the person *par excellence* to explain how to reach out to or get in touch with the unattainable inside of history. I look forward to hearing his views on how and why to introduce war in museums.

I wish you an exciting and interesting few days and look forward to all that is to come.

As ICOMAM chairman, I now officially declare this symposium open.

_Piet de Gryse_  
ICOMAM Chairman