

The Western Balkan Regional Museum Network



Cultural Heritage without Borders is an independent organization based in Sweden dedicated to rescuing and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage touched by conflict, neglect or human and natural disasters. We see our work as a vital contribution to building democracy and supporting human rights. CHwB is neutral when it comes to conflicting parties, but not to the rights of all people to their cultural heritage.



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Why museums matter

Museums are powerful institutions. They represent and reflect society. They collect, preserve, research and educate us about the past, present and future. In some ways they can be seen as a 'collective memory'. This means that museums are not neutral; they are deciding what matters and what doesn't. They are making value judgments through what they display and how they display it.

Many people recognize that museums can contribute to democracy and human rights. They can be places where difficult matters are discussed, and where debate can happen. They can also be places where people can meet and where common heritage can be shared. However, this is not always the case, and museums are often manipulated and used as political

weapons; presenting a biased view of society.

The recent history of the western Balkans is one of conflict, war and political dictatorship. Yet there is a huge amount of shared heritage that can reveal a very different view of the region; one of rich diversity, human achievement, ancient civilizations and contemporary artistic excellence. Museums can also present this face to the world and become places of creativity, conflict resolution and dialogue.

To support this process, Cultural Heritage without Borders initiated the Regional Museum Network in 2006, supported predominantly by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).



The aims and objectives of the Regional Museum Network



Objectives: To contribute to the understanding of cultural diversity and to reconciliation and EU integration of the countries in the Western Balkans and to promote the understanding that the right to own one's cultural heritage is an integral part of human rights. Museums have an important role to play in these efforts.

The network aims to strengthen the role of museums as democratic and creative meeting places, and to present museums as rich source of knowledge about society and people and to create opportunities for all members of society to experience education, fun and enlightenment.

Museums can also discuss difficult and controversial issues in society to improve capacity and creativity for participating museums in management and reaching out to the public. This is done through enhanced inter-cultural dialogue and in accordance with international museum standards.

Through working with these aims the museums have become more active players in their local communities and have found new and exciting ways to cooperate and work together. Starting this process was challenging, and there still is a long way to go, but real changes are now being made.

“The network enables us to promote not only our museum collections and activities but also our countries’ cultural values”

– Museum Director

“Through working together we are reminding people of the common background of the Balkans and making them understand and not just tolerate differences”

– Museum Director

The partners

The network was founded in 2006 at the Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala, Sweden. Eleven museums from six Balkan countries were invited and all are still active members of the network.

The network represents a range of museums, from large national institutions to small historic houses. The numbers of people employed within them ranges from three people to over 100. The richness of the region is encapsulated in the collections, which are local, regional and national; many with international significance.

A key part of the network is working together and sharing resources. Through rich and open dialogue, many problems have been shared and common solutions found. A key strength of the network is the sense of being part of a group with similar concerns, even though the situation and location might be different.

The main working methods are workshops, study visits, seminars and group working. Underpinning it all is a commitment to peace and reconciliation through working together.

“We have good contacts with the related institutions in the region and personal contacts with colleagues”

– Museum Director

“It is important to have different heritage researched, presented, discovered, as a part of mutual heritage and it is important for Balkan countries to communicate and to understand past and current situations; and for people involved in joint projects to learn to listen to others and find common ground”

– Museum Director

Supporting creative leaders

A major part of the work of the museum network is supporting museum directors to become creative leaders. Creative leadership is about developing and supporting museum professionals to realize their full potential. It is also about supporting change so that the museum becomes an actor in society.

Being a museum director can be tough, especially when the economic and political situation is uncertain. Often it can make a real difference just to know that there are others who are facing similar challenges, and that problem solving can include their views and experiences.

Since 2006, several workshops and meetings have been organized for museum directors. These have included topics such as strategic planning, staff development, leadership styles, and current issues in museology.



Here are some of the benefits of the network that our Directors have found from these meetings.

- Great experiences from other directors
- Exchange of ideas, methods and approaches
- Confidence, confirmation and support from colleagues
- Being more creative in our work
- Inspired to increase training of our staff
- Offered systematic approach to some common but basic problems and possible ways of solving these

The female network

Supporting greater equality is a key platform for the work of ChwB. Women in senior positions are often under immense pressure and can feel isolated, especially if they are directors of large museums. The female network is a forum where women in management

positions can discuss and share both problems and solutions, often finding that these are shared.

The members have talked about the benefits of the group. Here are some of the things they said.

“The biggest challenge is isolation and a feeling of loneliness; the network is a vital forum for me to explore these feelings in a safe and supportive environment, with others in a similar position”.

“I care for my staff and want to support them. I think this is a strength, but sometimes you feel you have to justify it; maybe people think it is weak, but it isn’t!”

“I used to feel like a “a weak woman in a male position”, but I feel my self-confidence has increased and I am not alone”.



Building new audiences

Helping museums to become more democratic is about involving more people in all aspects of their life and work. Too often, museums forget that they are for the public-ordinary men, women and children, and that means that they need to open their doors wide.

Many people never visit their local museum; maybe they think it is too boring, or that they will not be welcome. Museums need to work with audience development and reach out to new groups of people, especially those people who are experiencing isolation.

Many of the workshops have been about working with children and improving communication strategies. We have also looked at our exhibitions and discussed new ways of presenting information so that it will appeal to wider audiences. Museums can turn outwards and be proactive, as well as being important scientific institutions.

One of our most successful partnerships has been with the Stavros Niarchos Foundation who has supported a major project working with disabled children and adults. Our museums have become more accessible and have done some wonderful work to open up to one of the most marginalised groups in the Balkan region.

“Enriching the museum with new audiences of people with disabilities”

“This project has been more than useful, it has been inspiring”



“1+1:Life & Love”

– simultaneous exhibition project

*“Through actual cooperation
our relations are strengthened”*

*“Through 1+1 we are
involving young people in
activities of the museum and
developing creative activities
that help them understand their
environs or their past”*

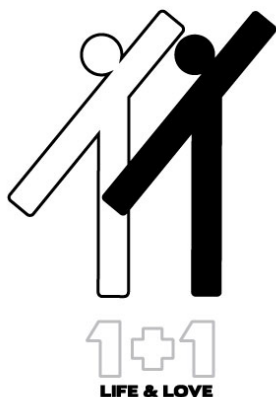
*“For the first time we have the
possibility of bringing all
participating museums together
in one exhibition”*

-Workshop participant

On March 11 2011 all 11 members of the network will open an exhibition called 1+1“Life & Love”. This is a unique event and it will show how it is possible to work together and creatively “across borders” and make real steps towards peace and reconciliation.

The title of the exhibition reflects the museums’ desire to showcase the richness of their shared heritage and collections. “1+1” is a symbol of relationships, of coming together and of partnership. “Life and Love” are universal and unite all. This exhibition projects captures the spirit of the network and is a manifestation of many years of working together and building up trust and understanding.

Each museum has its own exhibition. These range from contemporary sculpture, to cartoons, traditional embroidery and classic archaeology. Many young artists are involved in the projects. A major travelling exhibition will take the story of 1+1 to an international audience. This ambitious and exciting project represents a manifestation of the achievement of four years of the regional museum network, and will launch the next exciting phase of development.





LIST OF PARTICIPATING MUSEUMS

Museum of Republic Srpska, Banja Luka
National Museum of Serbia, Belgrade
National Museum of Montenegro, Cetinje
The Gjakova Museum, Gjakova
City Museum, Novi Sad
Museum of Kosovo, Pristina
National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo
Historic Museum, Shkodra
The National Museum of Macedonia, Skopje
National Museum of Albanian History, Tirana
Zenica Museum, Zenica

”We shall never forget but we cannot stay forever on the battlefield”



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