

Removing statues as a natural need to re-write history

Thinking a little deeper about the ongoing popular removal and destruction of statues around the world provides some other perspectives than just wanting to preserve these historical relics. It may be more important to preserve the memory of what is happening now. We see a clash of civilizations and struggle for human rights as remarkable as the Me-Too movement. It may very well be about being on the right side of history which provides the central learning experience now. Museums should take that seriously.

The history of statues depicting humans is indeed closely related to Western civilization from ancient Greek forward. The dominating motive for statues outside the Western hemisphere and in some of the nearest neighbouring regions has usually been of religious kind. We have all seen Egyptian God-like Pharos and sitting Buddhas in South-East Asia. We have the same roots in Europe, but here statues of Christian icons have gradually been accompanied by statues of kings, princes, and some queens and finally individuals of the ruling class. Already in Ancient Greek and Rome it was a symbol of social status to be depicted as a statue or a bust.

From the early modern bourgeois breakthrough in Europe and especially at a growing pace during the 19th century lots of statues were erected. They depicted men who in their own time or just after their death were considered important to development – that being political, financial, scientific, cultural or something else. The key word here is of course “development”. What is defined as development towards progress for some may be less positive for others. Naturally, the age of European imperialism and colonialism brought great scientific discoveries but, it also was a period which developed racism as science under the race biological heading and racism as ideology under fascist politics. It is not surprising that many influential men can be icons of both stories.

It is by no means difficult to understand how the social memories of racism from the epoque of imperialism and colonialism is brought to life by police brutality and in a wider sense by observing structural inequality in the Western hemisphere. It does not disappear by destroying statues and that is probably neither the right interpretation of the action. When masses destroy a statue, it is more likely to be a symbolic action taken in an atmosphere of rage.

Could the following be a reasonable question: Why have for example museums not taken initiative to have ethically and politically debatable statues removed from the streets and public spaces before?

Museums have to a high extend located themselves as the worldly cathedrals or temples of our time and many inquiries has demonstrated the high credibility they have. The ethical code of museums has been internationally constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed – others would call it edited – in an un-going eternal process since 1946. It is highly protected by the International Council of Museums and museum staff around the world are dedicated to the task of using the ethical code of museums in practise. The ethics of museums are so important for the brand of museums that heathen debates often follows every initiative to change. Only last summer in Kyoto the discussions of a proposed change engaged thousands of museum colleagues globally.

Museums are organizations which feel a special responsibility to preserve and use the material and immaterial traces of past and present. Museums live on either public funding from taxpayers, or earning from visitor’s payments, or both. Whatever form the museums are dependent on public trust. I would say that from this follows responsibility to earn that public trust.

The museums decide every day what will become traces from the past which should be preserved. They do so by their collecting and preservation practice. The museums also decide what stories of the past and present are told and displayed in the museums and often outside too. The relation between the two levels of decision is academically discussed and there is not one answer to that, but it is a fact that decisions are made. Many museum colleagues are currently quoted in media for saying that

it is a great shame that statues are destroyed. They normally present two reasons for their position. It is said that the statues – of the men accused of being slave owners or otherwise racists – are necessary equipment to tell both positive and negative stories as the depicted men give reason to both. It is also said that removing the statues does not change the past. Both are true but does not show much understanding of the situation and not even the responsibility of the museums as guardians of the past.

As learning organisations, the museums here provide no answers to why they have not convincingly used the statues now endangered to tell both the positive and negative stories. It cannot have been convincingly as the statues are currently seen as primarily or only negative references.

Removing the statues does not change the past but it does evidently change the present. Even museums are organisations who exists in the context of the present and does not serve the public well if they show no empathy or understanding of current needs.

What could museums the do to be relevant guardians of past material and immaterial traces as the situation escalates? Well, for a start the museums could remove or propose removal of statues which provoke major parts of the public and bring these statues to the museum and there provide diversified stories for the statues which they obviously has lacked. If such a removal is for some reason not possible the museum could provide a diversified story telling on the spot.

I cannot help thinking that most museums are caught with their pants down in the whole situation about the provoking statues of the 19th and 20th century. I believe museums should think about why that happened now and how museums can be prepared in the future. I think it will be a big shame if museum colleagues believe something like this will never happen again and that – many but not all – museums in their self-proclaimed politically neutral position cannot act here. As museums belong to all the people, they are anything but neutral whatever they act or not now.