A Project for a Museum of Mediterranean Cultural Interdependencies in Palermo

PATRIZIA DRAGONI, Università degli Studi di Macerata

After the tragedy of the Second World War, the international community strongly felt the need to create new instruments capable of ensuring a lasting peace. In this context, UNESCO was founded in 1945 with the aim of promoting cooperation among peoples through education, science, and culture, based on the belief that wars originate in the minds of men and that it is precisely there that the defenses of peace must be built. The following year, in 1946, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) was also established, with the purpose of fostering cooperation among museums at an international level and transforming them into tools for mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue.

In this climate, museums assumed a profoundly renewed role: no longer merely places of preservation, but active spaces within society, capable of influencing the present. UNESCO and ICOM promoted exhibitions and curatorial projects aimed at disseminating universal values, making extensive use of the direct and effective language of images. Photography, in particular, was regarded as a privileged medium, capable of overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers and reaching a broad and diverse audience.

Among the earliest significant examples was the exhibition *Know Your United Nations*, held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1947, which presented the structure and aims of the UN through photographic panels and visual materials. Even more ambitious was *Les droits de l'Homme* (Paris, 1949), organized by UNESCO to disseminate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: an engaging exhibition that, through images, documents, and installations, narrated the long process of the conquest of rights while warning against the risks of their violation.

In the following years, numerous exhibitions further developed this approach. Shows such as *Art – A Means to World Understanding* and *Concepts of Man in Sculpture* sought to demonstrate, through the comparison of works from different cultures, that similarities among human beings are deeper than their differences. The culmination of this perspective was *The Family of Man*, curated by Edward Steichen at MoMA in 1955: a large-scale photographic narrative of the human experience, capable of emotionally engaging audiences and conveying the idea of a unified global community.

Through these initiatives, museums established themselves as key instruments of cultural diplomacy: not only custodians of the past, but active agents in the construction of a more just society, committed to promoting rights, equality, and intercultural dialogue.



It is within this same cultural context that the project of a "model museum" aimed at illustrating the interdependence among different cultures was conceived, planned for Palermo in the second half of the 1950s. Anticipated by a communication from Georges Henri Rivière, then president of ICOM, during the 1954 conference held for the inauguration of the National Gallery of Sicily at Palazzo Abatellis, the project was discussed in detail during a meeting of experts held in Palermo from May 14 to 16, 1956. Chaired by Lionello Venturi, the meeting brought together leading Italian and international scholars, including G. Carlo Argan, Federico Chabod, Ahmed Fikri, and Pierre Pradel.

The aim of this new type of museum was to highlight the interdependence among different cultures, emphasizing their mutual influences which, far from undermining the identity of individual civilizations, enrich their development. It was therefore conceived as an experimental project, based on an innovative methodological approach. In this perspective, Sicily appeared as an especially suitable location, due to its central position in the Mediterranean and its historical role as a crossroads between East and West, between Christianity and Islam. Not surprisingly, the project attracted the interest of numerous scholars from different disciplines, also in response to UNESCO's initiatives.

According to ICOM's guidelines, the museum was to be organized into approximately a dozen rooms: the first dedicated to the origins and early development of Sicilian culture, and the following ones to the main periods of its history, from its beginnings to the contemporary age. In each room, the display would be structured into three sections: objects from external cultures that influenced Sicily; materials representing local production in different historical periods; and evidence of Sicily's influence on other contexts. The exhibition design would prioritize original objects, supported by appropriate didactic materials, in order to make the content clear and accessible.

Although an exhibition was planned for 1959, no further developments of the project are currently known. Nevertheless, it represents a significant attempt to translate the principles of cultural diplomacy promoted by UNESCO into a museum form, anticipating reflections that remain central today on intercultural dialogue and the construction of a shared memory.