



Richard Doty  
*MUSEUMS AND THE PUBLIC:  
OBLIGATIONS AND RISKS*

*Proceedings of the ICOMON meetings held in: Stavanger, Norway, 1995, Vienna, Austria, 1996 / Memoria de las reuniones de ICOMON celebradas en: Stavanger, Noruega, 1995, Viena, Austria, 1996*

[Madrid] : Museo Casa de la Moneda, [1997]  
269 p. – ISBN 84-88298-03-X., pp. 88-89

Downloaded from: [www.icomon.org](http://www.icomon.org)

## MUSEUMS AND THE PUBLIC: OBLIGATIONS AND RISKS

**Richard Doty**

*Smithsonian Institution  
National Museum of American History  
Washington, USA*

Museums do not exist in vacuums. They are part of a wider community. That community is composed of many distinct segments, whose members may share certain views of the past, disagree about others. A museum, and especially a museum devoted to investigation and reporting of the past, must thread a narrow and sometimes tortuous path through the total community of which it forms a part. It must tell the truth - and tell it in what the latest scholarship suggests is the most accurate fashion: it must pay homage to the world of the professional historian, to the world of the academic. But it must constantly remind itself that the scholarly segment of society is just that - a part, and not the whole. There is a much larger group, to which attention must also be paid. That group is the general public - and when the truth as perceived by the historian clashes with the reality recognized and enshrined by the public tension can result. When the museum is supported by that public (in the form of taxes it pays to federal or local government) tension can escalate into open warfare, the disruption of careers - and a diminution of the public's regard and support for all cultural endeavours, including museums.

It seems to me that this actual or potential tension is one of the primary challenges facing today's institutions. Let me briefly illustrate the problem with recent events at the United States' largest public museum, the Smithsonian Institution.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum decided to mount a large exhibit commemorating the conclusion of the Second World War. That conflict ended, of course, with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and curators prepared an exhibit text which, with the bomb as a focal point, combined the closing of the war with the opening of the Atomic Age. Planning for the exhibit proceeded uneventfully enough until a museum script was leaked to a newspaper early in 1994. The script presented views at variants with those of much of the American public, especially members of veterans' groups. It suggested that official estimates of probable casualties from a conventional invasion of Japan were deliberately inflated after the bombs were dropped; suggested that instilling fear into a potential new adversary, the Soviet Union, was a factor in the use of the atomic bomb to end the war; and graphically described the destruction and loss of human life caused by this first employment of nuclear weapons.

Critics charged that the script was pro-Japanese and demanded its revision - or the abandonment of the entire exhibit. A series of meetings was held between staff historians and members of interested veterans' groups, and several script revisions were written - but satisfied no one. By the end of 1994, a newly-named Smithsonian Director was coming to the conclusion that something drastic must be done - and so, over the next few months, it was. The original exhibit was dropped. A greatly curtailed show, which

essentially avoided historic interpretation, was hastily cobbled together. The Director of the offending museum was allowed to resign - with regrets. And a potentially more controversial exhibit on the Vietnam War was tabled indefinitely, not the best omen for the future of publicly-supported, thought-provoking display.

To a degree, the problems and processes I have just related are unique to my country. Americans and Japanese have a peculiar view of each other, a perception going back to Commodore Perry if not before. And the Vietnam War was our war, regardless of what we thought of it then, or now. But every nation's history contains episodes of which it would rather not be reminded, and there is a natural temptation to focus on every nation's past in predictable and comfortable ways. So the fate of museums everywhere will continue to involve interaction between the same three components, the historian, or other curator, the public, and the supervisor, who will be increasingly called upon to act as referee between the other two.

Our three panellists will shed more light on the nature of this tripartite relationship, as it obtains in their particular cases.