From a network to a platform  
– the formation of the Balkan Museum Network

DIANA WALTERS, MUSEUM SPECIALIST

From the very outset of the Regional Museum Network (RMN), the idea of a joint exhibition had been discussed. However it was quickly apparent that such a project would be difficult if not impossible. The political and economic logistics of travelling a single show across a region with disputed borders, sporadic outbreaks of tension, legal disputes and pockets of deep hostility were formidable. Despite all the enthusiasm for such an event it was clear that there were many obstacles and risks.

In March 2010, a workshop was organised at the National Museum in Sarajevo, one of the founding members of the RMN. Here the question of a joint exhibition was again discussed and there was a real energy and desire to achieve something that publicly showed the Balkan museums as partners that worked together professionally, creatively and internationally. A key driving force was the desire to dispel the negative image of the countries involved. Young professionals particularly reacted to this, stating that they were tired of being seen as ‘countries that fight and hate each other’.

People began to think ‘outside the box’ and the idea of the Simultaneous Exhibition was born. Rather than have a travelling show, the eleven museums of the RMN decided to open exhibitions with the same title on the same day. So the ‘1+1:Life & Love’ simultaneous exhibition was born.

The journey to the opening, on March 11 2011, was rocky and challenging. There were many obstacles to overcome, not least the simple logistics of coordinating eleven separate exhibitions, across six countries, and involving over 100 museum professionals and partners. There was real courage and commitment and the individual museums worked hard – separately and together – to reach the opening day. It’s hard to fully understand the significance of 1+1, and it is important to understand that several of the museums took real risks in being on a shared public platform. But it worked, and on March 11 2011, eleven museums opened their 1+1:Life & Love exhibitions in a moment of true international solidarity.

Being part of a movement is really exciting; those moments when years and years of hard and patient development work move into a new phase foster a real tangible energy and often a significant shift will occur. This was the case in March 2011. From supporting each other
‘virtually’ people wanted to support them physically, and the ‘Peace Bus’ Tour was created. Over ten hectic days, a bus travelled to all of the eleven museums, and the virtual link became a real one. One young archaeologist from Bosnia Herzegovina observed that ‘we shall never forget, but we cannot stay forever on the battlefield’, a phrase that continues to have real resonance for the Balkan Museum work.

‘1+1:Live and Love’ took the BMN to a wider international audience. The opening was live streamed and over 5000 people tuned in to watch, despite being many technical difficulties. The openings were also really well supported by the Swedish Embassies and the extra gravitas given to these events helped to smooth over some of the political uncertainties.

In 2012 another milestone was reached with the first BMN conference. It was entitled ‘Meet, See, Do’ (MSD) as a way of signalling the active nature of the event. Over 60 delegates from eight Balkan countries gathered in Sarajevo to enjoy three full days of workshops, seminars, key-notes and networking. A second conference followed in Tirana in April 2013, and the third will take place in Novi Sad in April 2015. These conferences have been co-funded by SIDA, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the Swedish Institute, and are rapidly becoming key events in Balkan museum and heritage activity.

Two areas have emerged as particular strengths from Balkan museums; developing inclusive practice and interpretation. Since 2007 work around access and inclusion with Balkan museums has been supported by two major grants from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. This support has enabled many museums to understand the nature of discrimination against disabled people and to reach out to audiences that do not or cannot easily access their own heritage. As well as over 25 separate museum-based projects, the access and inclusion work has produced a group of trained and experienced consultants that can advise and support other museums in how to become more open as institutions. Members of the Balkan Museum Access Group were also instrumental in the first Balkan Museums without Barriers conference in October 2014. This two-day event broke new ground in terms of practice and understanding of the power of museums as places of social change.

The second area of strength is around heritage interpretation. Museums are highly political organisations and are often manipulated for specific aims. Equally, in an attempt to reduce what can be interference, museums often retreat to the relative safety of non-contentious displays based on archaeology, art history or nostalgic representations of ‘the past’. Understanding interpretation and developing strategies for learning, engagement and creativity has been a key focus for the BMN. This is particularly important around questions of recent history, identity and ethnicity – aspects that are often appropriated for political means. Interpretation is based on multiple voices, perspectives and understanding and is designed to use stories and narratives to weave threads through exhibitions and collections to support learning and discovery. A key objective of the BMN in coming years is to strengthen this and to bring museums alive as places of real discussion.

In 2015 the BMN will become an NGO in its own right. This is a massive achievement and is only possible because of the ongoing, unpaid, dedicated work of a group of museum professionals in the western Balkan countries. Taking a stand for collaboration with former enemies is brave and risky, and the continued international support of the network is vital if the NGO is to grow and become strong. That it is needed is clear; all the evidence shows that a growing number of museums are hungry for change and care passionately about their collections, buildings, colleagues and audiences. Initiatives such as the Womens’ International Leadership Development (WILD) programme, supported by SIDA up to 2014, ensure that creative leadership has a chance to develop, alongside enhancing equality. By 2015, sixteen Balkan women will have benefited from this professional development, and steps towards changing the dominant organisational culture of hierarchical patrimony will have begun.