

CULTURAL MISSION

MUSÉES
DE LA CIVILISATION



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1 BACKGROUND

The Government of Québec accepted and approved the concept document for Musée de la civilisation on August 26, 1987, after myriad discussions and a thoroughgoing reflection on the role and place of museums in our society. The document drew on previous North American and European experience together with Québec practices to propose a unified and inspirational vision that has helped chart the Museum's course for the past 25 years.

Musée de la civilisation's cultural mission today has lost none of its relevance. Like all living organizations, the Museum must adapt and reinvent itself in response to change. Nothing can be taken for granted: not its audience, whose expectations, demands, and needs are constantly evolving, nor the field of science, where knowledge is a work in progress. Even a standard-setting institution like Musée de la civilisation continues to be transformed, guided by its own experience and the explorations, experiments, and accomplishments of cultural institutions in Canada and around the world. It constantly seeks out challenges and strives to excel, knowing that its fate is forever to rethink, to cast doubt on what it knows, accepting that cultural institutions are necessarily and fundamentally in a state of flux.

The integration of Place Royale and Musée de l'Amérique francophone was one such step into a new territorial and cultural dimension. Now a museum complex of several differentiated cultural spaces, the institution embraced its identity as "Musées de la civilisation," putting new emphasis on the vocation, significance, and image of its component institutions: Musée de la place Royale, Musée de l'Amérique francophone, Maison historique Chevalier, Centre national de conservation et d'études sur les collections, and Musée de la civilisation.

Musées de la civilisation is a public institution and as such is committed to implementing the economic development, environmental, social, and cultural policies of the community (Agenda 21) and to universal openness. It takes an active role in the development of museum sciences and skill sharing as well as in the delivery of collaborative programs.



2 CHANGE

EXAMINING AND INCORPORATING CHANGE

In 25 years the Museum has delivered numerous productions to its audiences looking at and incorporating social change, technological change, and changes in cultural and museum approaches. The world has certainly changed.

A. Technology and interaction

Technological developments have triggered a paradigm shift, leading experts to speak of a “new humanism.” Without going into the details, there is no denying the impact of the digital revolution on strategies and practices, whether from the standpoint of knowledge development, communication, cultural mediation, participation, or collaboration.

B. Development of new disciplines and research

Artistic disciplines continue to develop and incorporate new forms of expression, influenced by globalization, cultural diversity, and new technologies. Traditional boundaries have become blurred. Multidisciplinary or even anti-disciplinary or undisciplined art abounds. *Musées de la civilisation* itself challenges disciplinary boundaries by mounting productions that incorporate diverse notions of heritage and juxtapose seemingly contradictory approaches such as art and science, or natural history and social ethics.

Scientific research is also revolutionizing our perception of the world and our daily lives. Science plays an ever more prominent role in society, as society does in science. Try talking about genetic engineering in isolation from ethics—or sustainable development without referring to culture.

C. The transformation of audiences

Cultural tourism, immigration, demographic trends, changes in social status, and the new importance of knowledge all lead us to the question of who goes or doesn't go to the museum—all the more pressing as people seem to expect to play a more active role: the traditional prescribed track through an institution no longer has the same appeal. People have so many ways to find information, and they can get it almost instantaneously. Audiences also seem to be looking for new experiences, authenticity, and structure all in one package.



D. An overcrowded cultural milieu

Cultural options have multiplied and become more sophisticated: major events, blockbuster exhibitions, and innovative forms of cultural mediation are now run-of-the-mill for many people. Greater access to international culture also drives this trend.

Museums of society have responded by exploring new fields of inquiry, including world culture and intangible heritage.

New museums have sprung up and many cities have brought in celebrity architects to create museums as urban signature pieces.

E. A national and international network

Musées de la civilisation's recognized status as a resource center for Quebec museums and an international benchmark attest to its commitment to and involvement in networking. Musées de la civilisation has a duty to remain a major player in cultural transmission on the provincial, national, and world scene. Here too the *modus operandi* have multiplied and become more complex. Musées de la civilisation has seen the rise of emerging economies and new demands for dialogue and exchange with their attendant burden of expectations.

F. Funding issues

Musées de la civilisation must continue its commitment to developing new sources of income and controlling expenditures even as it implements a development plan for its component institutions. The nature of a museum complex demands a special integration strategy



A MUSEUM OF SOCIETY

Recent European history has seen a gradual transformation of ethnological, historical, and territorial museums into museums of society, the term (*musée de société*) having risen to prominence at a colloquium in Mulhouse, France. Museums no longer define themselves by the scientific disciplines they specialize in but rather by their object of study—society itself.

Musées de la civilisation's path was already set when it laid out its multidisciplinary approach and topic of investigation—the human person examined according to a thematic approach. Musées de la civilisation's component institutions are all museums of society and tackle their subject from three perspectives:

A. Organization and structure

Societies organize, take on structure, and confront notions of power (military, civilian, religious, and so forth), internal and external forces and movements, and visions for development and conservation. In a nutshell, they are part of a complex web of relationships and dynamics that take various forms. Themes include for example the division of labor, the place of the family, gender relations, universality, exclusion, urbanization, money, democracy, and war.

B. Communication and exchange

All human development rests on communication and exchange. The issue has always been fundamental. Although today we too often restrict ourselves to thinking about it from the perspective of media and technology, we need to remember that communication and exchange is the foundation of all growth and learning and key to individual and social evolution and transformation. It also takes many forms, appearing in the guise of giving, teaching and learning, trade, immigration, transportation, colonization, social networks, language, and more.

C. Creativity and innovation

All societies create, innovate, push limits, explore, and try new approaches. This includes not only scientific discoveries, technological advances, and the transformation of materials but also the pure power to imagine, create, and express oneself. We know that our societies are irrevocably changed by our relentless quest to understand and interpret our world, by scientific, cultural, and spiritual advances. Inevitably too our exploration of creativity and innovation includes an examination of perverse effects, the limitations of our searching, or more straightforwardly the impacts and consequences of all human endeavor.



The mighty human epic highlights our species' common past and shared future. In it we become in a sense the consciousness of earth's civilization.

Technological progress, economic development, demographic forces, and political issues all confirm our universal and shared responsibility for the future of our planet. Humanity must learn to think of itself in universal terms—to think globally.

Yet we can only grasp this global space-time if we are able to apprehend our own rootedness in a specific place without losing sight of the way this “place of our own” exists in a relationship of interdependence with all other places and environments. We may be from here, but here is also defined in relation to elsewhere—to other societies and their stories.

Understanding and explaining Québec demands a grasp of the ebb and flow of the world it is part of. Questions of language, democracy, economics, society, and culture gain their meaning through reinterpretation in discussions and confrontations with other societies.

Musées de la civilisation must always be on its guard against exoticism and distancing when dealing with other cultures: we get to know other societies so they can enrich our take on the world, our understanding of motive forces and evolution, and the magnitude of developmental issues.



4 WHY?

A PLACE WHERE THE INDIVIDUAL, SOCIETY, AND THE ENTIRE SPECIES MEET

Musées de la civilisation’s raison d’être has always been its visitors—indeed all Quebecers. Over the years it has carefully monitored the public impact of its actions in a multitude of studies and surveys, keeping a particularly close eye on give-and-take during educational and cultural mediation activities. It also stresses its identity as a place of wonder, understanding, and reflection as it takes part in the creation and spread of knowledge.

Musées de la civilisation doesn’t provide all the answers. It doesn’t lay down fixed paths: it is instead a place where the individual, society, and the entire human species meet. It tackles the world’s complexity with all its uncertainty and doubt. The point is always to get to what’s real in order to develop a shared human consciousness. Musées de la civilisation continues to provide a touchstone for thinking about our shared, never-ending search for happiness, a better life, and improved ways of doing things.

The 1996 UNESCO commission report entitled Learning: The Treasure Within sees our societies as constantly confronted by tension between “the global and the local,” “the universal and the individual,” “tradition and modernity,” “long-term and short-term considerations,” “the extraordinary expansion of knowledge and human beings’ capacity

to assimilate it,” and others. The report’s conclusion suggests learning throughout life as the “heartbeat of society,” and describes the four pillars it rests on: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.

Musées de la civilisation doesn’t try to replace school and is not the only institution for spreading knowledge. However, the specific character of each component institution provides a unique experience all its own. Each institution contributes its own ways of knowledge take-up that consider diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and the fact that reality is multidimensional. They look at knowledge and how it’s developed (methods), self-awareness (including the complex nature of an individual’s multiple identities), and the consciousness of humanity (of being part of the human race).

WHY MUSÉES DE LA CIVILISATION?

To understand the world,
to share a consciousness of humanity,
and to create points
of reference.



5

AUDIENCES AND THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

RESPONSIBILITIES AND STRATEGIES

Musées de la civilisation is there for people from everywhere. As a national public institution with an overall mission however, it has a number of responsibilities that impose strategic choices.

A. Outreach

Outreach takes two main forms. One is recognizing socioeconomic diversity and differences in learning styles, local identities, and civic issues with a multidimensional, multi-communicational program to speak to and bring the museum experience to the broadest possible audience. The other is finding ways for people to collaborate and participate by hosting public activities and providing opportunities for reflection.

B. A total experience

Visiting Musées de la civilisation is a total experience of wonder, understanding, and thinking. Each component institution is a place of discovery and openness involving emotions, thought, and sharing. They are a set of tools for developing human consciousness—places for understanding the world. To see better is to understand better. To understand better is to live better. Musées de la civilisation charts a course.

C. Enduring relationships

Musées de la civilisation believes that its social and cultural impact depends in large part on developing loyalty and on taking the long view regarding programs, outside activities, and partnerships with other places. From the beginning, Musées de la civilisation has always sought to be not just a one-time visit, but a recurring actor on the visitor's journey of discovery and learning.



6

APPROACHES AND COMMITMENTS

Musées de la civilisation has chosen a number of approaches and commitments to serve as its cultural signature.

APPROACHES

A. A theme-based approach

Musées de la civilisation searches for the meaning of things, building its programming around themes that cast light on the various aspects of human existence. The collections of course have their own shapes and stories (suggested by collectors, curators, researchers, museologists...) and Musées de la civilisation sets great store by the quality of its collections.

In recent years Musées de la civilisation has explored the many facets of popular culture (including film, television, song, and videogames), cultures of the world, historical perspectives, local cultures, and the relations between science and societies. Its institutions have tackled contemporary issues along with basic and perennial social questions. They have brought in artists, scientists, philosophers, and others to examine the how and the why of things. They have built their programming around a reading of the world we live in.

B. A multidisciplinary approach

Musées de la civilisation makes use of all disciplines in its search to understand the world. Although the term interdisciplinary may sometimes be a better fit, what matters here is the importance of incorporating multiple takes and points of view into our thinking as keys to understanding the world.

Musées de la civilisation has over the years explored numerous themes with the help of the humanities (history, sociology, anthropology, ethnology, etc.) and increasingly the so-called hard sciences. This trend is almost certain to continue.

We acknowledge a certain convergence of the “hard” and “soft” sciences in recent years. Even the likes of art history, while remaining anchored in the humanities, now seeks to incorporate the contributions of science into its knowledge and understanding of the world.

The history of our civilizations is intimately bound up with the history of methods, inventions, and technology. Even as we speak of an age before and after the printing press, there is also an age before and after the Internet.

Most of today’s pressing issues also involve technology and science. Issues of sustainable development, genetic engineering, natural resource exploitation, food distribution and safety, energy provision, the impact of communication technologies, and so forth all demonstrate the close connection between science and society. Like issues relating to society (such as immigration, demographics, and education), they call for contributions from multiple disciplines.

Musées de la civilisation believes in the necessity of general culture and knowledge, in continued learning, despite its limitations. And it is part of that process, comparing general culture to a skin that can hold all our questions, contradictions, certainties, and identities without closing us off from our surroundings.



C. A dynamic process

Talking about a society while attempting to understand scientific facts means working with the notion of change. Societies develop and knowledge and understanding are built. How do we put our finger on what's important, identify the references, and grasp the mechanics of social transformation, distinguishing between the essential and the nonessential? In this lies the challenge facing Musées de la civilisation.

French-language North America, the individual within society, the development of understanding, Québec's relationship with the world: all these are part of a dynamic process that leads us to the notion of networks (networks of people and societies as well as networks involving their interrelations with the environment, technology, materials, and so forth).

Just as a multidisciplinary approach is helpful in dealing with complexity, the consideration of motor forces and their attendant networks should help us avoid falling into static, exoticized pictures of other societies as well as our own. It also reminds us of the importance of constant research and scientific advances.

Delving into a question or issue is all about figuring out what we know and what we don't know. It demands that we start a conversation, find a way to explore new avenues, or take another look at what we think we know.

Introducing new things, encouraging thought, inculcating a love of learning: these remain what Musées de la civilisation's component institutions are all about. They don't have all the answers—they're part of the process.

D. A general yet differentiated approach

Musées de la civilisation must never forget that knowledge takes many forms. Although knowledge acquisition, notably the importance of fostering all-around culture, remains the institution's first priority, it has chosen also to take an interest in practical, emotional, and social skills in the conviction that the underlying issues always come down to the opposition of local vs. global, understanding vs. action, individual vs. collective, past vs. present, or myself vs. the other. Musées de la civilisation thus accords full recognition to the critical role of human mediation.



COMMITTED TO

A. Rigor

Processes must necessarily be based on thorough research and accurate, dependable content. Musées de la civilisation's impact hinges on the credibility of what it says and does.

Musées de la civilisation thus has recourse to committees of outside experts. The steering committee helps management set strategic priorities, while the collections development committee advises on curatorial operations.

Each theme Musées de la civilisation explores is assigned a scientific committee composed mainly of experts from universities, often joined by cultural committees. Material is always validated by researchers and is based on research of various kinds.

Curators conduct research on the collections, and Musées de la civilisation encourages work from universities by offering scholarships for research in specific areas. Curators also work together on heritage-related issues.

B. Experimentation, innovation, relevance

Musées de la civilisation is seen as a hotbed of innovation and has left its mark on the history of museums with its approach, museography, cultural activities, and social initiatives. It has found new ways to make contact with new audiences. The cultural education sector is faced with the necessity of constantly reinventing its thinking and activities in an open-ended, multipolar world. Nothing can be taken for granted and there is no one way to be or do things. The only certainty is the constant obsession with ensuring that our material (form and content) speaks to a multiplicity of audiences. Innovation and experimentation serve our cultural mission provided they are grounded in effectiveness, efficiency, and greater impact.

We innovate not for the sake of being innovative, but so we can get things right. Everything Musées de la civilisation does is subject to this same challenge, and all sections of the institution have shown a tremendous capacity for self-renewal over the years.



Musées de la civilisation component institutions must be learning institutions, forever moving forward. They must be rooted in policies and practices of experimentation (and self-criticism). It's about awareness, collaboration with other cultural and educational sectors, training, facing facts, getting help from committees of outside consultants, attending conferences and symposiums, making goal-oriented choices, and targeting audiences. In a nutshell, it's about programming.

C. Integration

Musées de la civilisation takes an integrated approach, bringing the specificity of all its functions together into a collective process and shared vision. Research, collections, exhibitions, cultural mediation, and education all have a part in developing themes, dissemination programs, and institutional commitments.

Musées de la civilisation speaks with one voice, but in a plethora of words and guises. Every word opens and encourages dialogue, rendering its institutional message stronger and more cogent. Its cultural interventions reflect one another to resonate more deeply in people's hearts and minds.



7 CONCLUSION

THE PILLARS OF OUR WORK

Musées de la civilisation can continue to play a key role in society by relying on certain pillars:

1. Musées de la civilisation's component institutions must cut through and decode the clamor of information, conventional wisdom, and fashionable thinking. They must analyze, collect, dissect, and make distinctions in order to reveal the essential.
2. Musées de la civilisation communicates and its communications must be multidimensional and differentiated. It must enlist all knowledge and all museology in the service of effectiveness and relevance.
3. It must be grounded in excellence: the excellence of its collections, its exhibitions, its mediation and dissemination work, and its management. The search for excellence must be part of a culture of adventure and experimentation.
4. Musées de la civilisation must live up to its responsibilities as a national institution. Component museums cannot achieve their goals without the commitment and engagement of all members. Les Musées must always be a team.

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**MUSÉES DE LA
CIVILISATION**

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