## PARLIAMENT OF CANADA

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON CANADIAN HERITAGE

#### THE STATE OF CANADIAN MUSEUMS

Brief submitted to the committee by

René Rivard, Fellow, Canadian Museums Association

Cultura bureau d'études 1070 Lajoie Avenue, Door 12 Outremont, QC, H2V 1N6 Telephone: 514-274-5908 Email: <u>rene.rivard@cultura.ca</u> Website: <u>www.cultura.ca</u>

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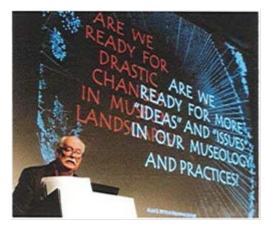
Dear committee members:

I appeared before you on June 9, 2016, to share my thoughts and opinions on Canada's museum and heritage landscape, which I have been observing and analyzing since 1970, when I was appointed to be the superintendent of the national historic sites in Quebec and Ontario. The position fell under the jurisdiction of what was then known as the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien was the minister at the time.

Given the interest that my comments generated at the committee meeting, I decided to submit this brief to complete my presentation, which was a bit disjointed because I did not have much time to prepare. I also want to share my thoughts on the main trends in the museum world and on the obstacles and pitfalls to avoid in the coming decades.

I would first like to specify that I subscribe the definition of museum developed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which includes not just museums per se, but also heritage sites that are open to the public, conscience museums, interpretive centres, ecomuseums, and any other institution devoted to conserving, promoting, and sharing tangible or intangible, cultural or natural, and living or past aspects of national, regional, and local heritage.

In the opening statement that I gave on June 9, I spoke about the three types of museology that I have observed over the course of my career: the museology of objects, the museology of subjects, and the museology of ideas and issues. The museology of ideas has emerged in a number of different countries. To build on those remarks, I am providing you with some excerpts from a speech that I gave at the ICOM 2016 General Conference, which was held in Milan, Italy, from July 4 to 9.



The theme of my speech, an Alma Wittlin Memorial Lecture, was "Museums and Changing Cultural Landscapes". Its purpose was to make people aware of the urgent need to move toward the presentation of themes and embrace new technology. I asked and answered several questions, as follows.

#### What about current museum landscapes?

When I look at today's museums, I see as many landscapes as there are types of museums, whether they are led by either conservative or creative people, whether they are collectiondriven, or visitor-oriented, or blockbuster addicted..., whether they are ivory towers, elitesupported or community-involved, whether they are in major cities, in small towns or somewhere in the country, whether they obey to "golden-age" nostalgia, to avant-garde art or work for community development...

## Are museum institutions working for a better world?

These museum landscapes can be described as constantly evolving scenes, going from the pure materiality of objects and collections to the intangibility and sociability of ideas and issues, of concerns and search for solutions...

## Are museums living in the present?

Some are, but not that many have adopted the ways that will prevail in the 2020s. We all know that we are living in an age where virtual reality is not only current, but more and more on the front scene. Some museums are ready to confront with new technologies, others aren't! Some adapt their presentations and programs to the new realities, others don't! Usually, for reasons like the lack of staff and adequate budgets, like poor or obsolete facilities, depressive conditions to face problems and publics, etc.

Are museum directors and staff ready for drastic changes in their museum landscapes? for more "ideas" and "issues" in their museology and practices? The answers to these crucial questions belong to museum workers, especially those of the young generations and to those who support museums, whether it is morally or financially, whether federal, provincial or local governments and agencies, whether heritage or arts groups, supporters or philanthropists...

Where should museums start in this movement for a better 21<sup>st</sup> century? Museums have to start from the roots, and no more from the branches. They have to start with the people they serve and build with them and for them their changing cultural landscapes. They have to propose and defend new social ideas and practical tools to foster a better quality of life and of

our environment. They must be better "citizens", putting the emphasis on service and implication rather that conservation and soi-disant neutrality.

## This is what I consider the true "democratic job" museums must tend to.

## Three evolving museum landscapes

When **I** look at the history of museums and heritage sites [as told you on June 9], 1 see three general scenes or landscapes resulting from almost three centuries of museum development.

## "Objects museology"

Everyone knows the first and primal museum landscape. It is the

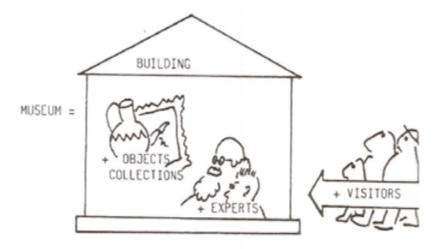
conventional one that I call in French "museologie des objets" which can possibly be labeled "objects museology".

Years ago, Hugues de Varine, former Secretary General of ICOM, coined a very short definition for this museum landscape in defining the parameters of

its institutions:

museum = building + collections + visitors.<sup>i</sup>

Later I added to the equation: + **curators** *and experts*, as they are a vital of conventional museums and their collections, their prime component. This drawing I made in 1984 for teaching purposes illustrates the proposed definition:



Here are 3 pictures of the first museum landscape – "objects museology" – 3 examples representing "conventional" museums:

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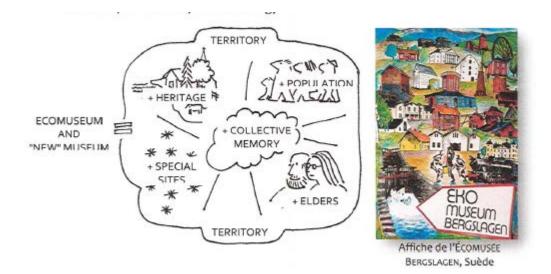


For the past two centuries, this has been the mainstream followed by all museums, be they art museums, science and technology museums, natural history museums, or history and ethnographic museums. This museum landscape favors the quest for knowledge, contemplation and appreciation, accumulating objects and specimens proving the finds of science and the creations of human art. I will not linger on this large landscape since it is well known and is always part of today's museum landscapes.

#### 2. "Subjects museology"

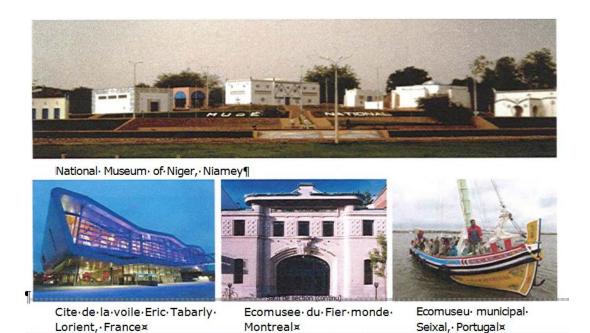
Another museum landscape emerged a few decades after the Second World War. I call it "rnuseologie des sujets" or "subjects museology" as it emphasizes the presentation of various themes or subjects, supporting their messages to visitors by objects used as witnesses to the subject presented rather than for themselves. It appeared and grew mostly in the 19805 and gos with the development of interpretation centres, site museums, ecomuseums and what I call "open" museums. In 1979, Hugues de Varine made up another equation for these new museum experiments by making the following addition: *Ecomuseum* or "open" museum = territory + *heritage* + *population*.<sup>*ü*</sup>

Here, the walls of the building and of the collections are deconstructed so the museum can reach beyond and into landscapes, into built environments, into intangible heritage... Visitors are replaced by members of the population acting as curators of their heritage and territory, and hosting those who visit these ecomuseums and museums. The sketch below shows the difference between objects and subjects museology.



In this recent landscape, we saw the emergence and development of a great number of interpretation centres set up in heritage sites and parks, of ecomuseums, of new and old museums who dared to venture more deeply into the age of communication which was developing in the 1970s and 80s. I was for many years very much part of that movement.

The following pictures illustrate this subjects museology:



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#### 3. "Ideas and issues museology"

At the beginning of the 21<sup>5t</sup> century, a new museum landscape emerged. In 2004, I started to call it "nnuseologie des ides" or "ideas-issues museology" as it is closely related to museum ventures called "musees citoyens" or "conscience museums", as it is gradually evolving into cultural and sustainable development and into the new media society.

If I make an equation similar to Hugues de Varine's previous definitions, it could read as such:

# citizen and conscience museums = society and its milieu + issues, stakes and challenges + ideas, partners and social actors + committed citizens.

It is rather long and more complex, as is the third museum landscape I am trying to define. This landscape shows an important switch from material culture and heritage, that is a real departure from objects per se or as witness to subjects, to some very intangible aspects of our societies, to ideas, to issues affecting our lives and our milieu.

Citizen museums and conscience museums deal more and more with issues of real life and with concerns and problems, such as climate change, social justice, human rights, and war and its consequences, demographics and food availability, poverty, growing cleavage between rich and poor, racism...

Ecomuseums and sites of conscience are an active part of this museum landscape. Most of these responsibility-developing museums want to convey how to become better citizens, how to repair some of the ecological damages done to nature and so on, by stressing the importance of community, of discussions, of pooling resources, of searching and finding local possible solutions, of working for sustainability...

Again, some pictures to illustrate this third level of museum development:



National Museum of work Noorkoping, Sweden



Red Cross Museum Geneva, Switzerland



Museum on the Seam Jerusalem, Israel



National Constitution Center Philadelphia, USA



Musee de la Resistance Grenoble, France



Human Rights Exhibition NY State Museum, Albany NY

This last museum landscape is evolving slowly - but surely - towards new trends and new museological practices. In a recent book, Peter van Mensch and Leontine Meijer present various ways for museums to go beyond conventional formulas and routines, to explore new avenues of linking with the community and constituency they serve.<sup>iii</sup>

## Upcoming museum trends

In addition to observing and taking into account the changing landscape of contemporary museums, a review of the state of museums in Canada must consider the trends that are currently developing in the areas of conservation and the promotion and presentation of museum heritage to the Canadian public.

Why? These trends must be taken into account when formulating recommendations to improve Canadian museums and institutions so that government programs and policies can be developed that focus on the future of these institutions rather than just on preserving objects and specimens.

In order to accomplish that goal, we need to identify upcoming trends and analyze their objectives. We also need to look at the changes and advances associated with these trends and any problems the changes pose as they are adopted and implemented in the museum world.

In this brief, I will therefore share with you my thoughts and the questions I have been asking myself about the main trends that have been observed over the past little while.

## Collection development trends

Collections are the common denominator of every type of museums. For some, they are an end in themselves, while for others they are a means to an end. Contemporary museology favours the latter approach because, these days, museums are seen as tools for cultural change and development rather than places to store and display objects from the past.

Why the change? The reason is that most museums have changed their mission statements in recent years in order to take on a more explicit role in helping to meet sociocultural and even sociopolitical objectives.

Some museums define themselves as platform for reflection and dialogue; as a place where many voices can be heard and where disagreement and difficult subjects can be addressed; or, even better, as a place where people can feel at home, break down barriers, and explore new subjects, including those that were once taboo.

The trends in collections and conservation are:

- **Improved consistency in the collection of objects to put in museums** This often includes the adoption of a policy for disposing of works and objects that were collected in the past but that are now inconsistent with the current collection and conservation approach that the museum wants to take in order to achieve its mission.
- **Bringing together collections and their relevant archives** For example, objects from a certain region of the country can be paired with the relevant regional archives, specifically photographs, maps, or documents that feature the object in question or provide context for it.
- A gradual move from the principle of ownership to that of stewardship There is a growing feeling in communities that the collections in their museums belong to them and they are assumed to be common property.
- Increased documenting of the present day Museums are moving more and more toward documenting the present in order to be able to knowledgeably interpret it in the coming decades. Take, for example, the museums in Sweden. In the late 1970s, they created a national network called SAMDOK (an acronym for Samla samfunnsdokumentasjon), which works to collect and network the Swedish nation as it evolves. For example, every year, Nordiska Museet in Stockholm acquires what is believed to be the most popular Christmas gift that year in order to document Swedish society's tastes and how they are changing, while other museums do the same with

electronic gadgets, furniture, and other objects, and the appropriate accompanying documentation.

- Regional storage of collections that are at risk or improperly stored Many collections held by Canada's small or medium-sized institutions are at risk or improperly stored. A large percentage of objects stored in local museums are in a precarious state of conservation when they deserve better. Museum professionals are currently promoting the establishment of regional reserves, so that, instead of being stored in museum basements, objects are stored in industrial-type storage facilities with proper thermo-hydration, dust-suppression and air filtration systems, appropriate storage areas for each category of heritage object, quarantine areas to control pests, handling areas for oversize items, etc. Many such projects are planned in Quebec, for example in Lachine, Rimouski, and Trois-Rivières. Montreal already has this type of storage facility, which is available to museums and collectors in the region.
- The need for visible storage that is open to visitors This need is felt more strongly when museums are being created or renovated since visitors are always particularly curious about museums' hidden treasures. The University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in Vancouver implemented the first visible storage system when it was built in the late 1970s, and we have since seen how valuable this type of storage facility really is.



New museums, such as the Louvre Lens in France and the Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp (MAS), currently have a good portion of their collections in visible storage areas that are even accessible to visitors.



• Collection mobility is being used more and more often to address the difficulty of disposing of collections – Collection mobility refers to the long-term loaning of objects to a museum or institution where they can be more useful and displayed to the public. The Museums Association of the United Kingdom introduced the concept of dynamic collections in 2005. This was accompanied by the idea of co-ownership, whereby an object can belong to two or more museums and travel between them based on programming needs. This type of co-ownership works particularly well when museums are acquiring more expensive works of art.

#### Trends in public participation

In museology, trends in popular relevance are often attributed to the movement for a new museology that began in the 1980s in both Europe and the Americas. I remember attending a meeting held that year in London at the international museum conference.

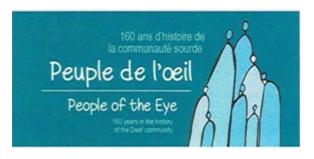
With the guidance of the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), participants recognized that this new movement was innovative and could make museums more popular with the public. Although this new approach falls under the museology of subjects, which I mentioned earlier, it led to the museology of ideas and issues, which has gradually been developing since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Needless to say, this movement for a new museology (MINOM), which was established in Quebec in 1984, has had a definite impact on the museum world in Canada and abroad. As a result, museums that, until then, had been quite conventional were making major changes in their attitude toward their visitors and in their interactive activities. Most of them became more democratized and inclusive, giving a backseat to their so-called elitist attitudes.

The principles of inclusion, accessibility, engagement, representation, and participation came to the fore in the museum world and resulted in new practices, innovative educational programs, and the presentation of controversial and previously unexplored subjects.

Museums, as an institution, became more of a centrifugal force than a centripetal one by changing the duties of their staff or even hiring new employees, other than curators, and by establishing new, interactive programs.

Take, for example, the People of the Eye exhibit, which is on display at the Écomusée du fier monde in Montreal until February 2017 and pays tribute to Quebec's deaf community.



This is a quadrilingual exhibit that celebrates deaf culture. It is presented in Quebec Sign Language and American Sign Language—the two languages used by deaf people in Quebec—as well as in English and in French.

Tours of the exhibit are given with two tour guides—one hearing and one deaf. What a great initiative for both hearing and deaf people. The deaf community attended the exhibit's opening in large numbers, proud to have found a museum that spoke about them and of the 160 years of history associated with their institutions and culture. To my knowledge, this exhibit is a world first. For more information, please visit: <u>http://ecomusee.qc.ca/en/event/people-of-the-eye/</u>.

Let us now look at the trends that resulted from museums' desire to increase public participation in museums.

- The three aspects of social inclusion—access, participation, and representation—are increasingly recognized as critical to sustainable development. The application of the principle of inclusion in museums has become crucial in making people aware of sustainable development and it provides an opportunity to promote real action and community involvement. The International Institute for the Inclusive Museum, which was established in India in 2008, promotes this trend by issuing publications and holding conferences throughout the world. In 2010, ICOM promoted its cultural diversity charter at the ICOM general conference in Beijing.<sup>iv</sup> The trend is now well established and should begin to move into museums that have not yet embraced it.
- Museums are seeking new input from museum enthusiasts and volunteers who will work there in a quasi-professional capacity. This trend, which is called the pro-am revolution, encompasses three new categories of workers: pre-professionals (apprentices,

students, and interns), semi-professionals (freelancers and part-time workers), and postprofessionals (former professionals who continue to be involved after they retire or move to another field). These quasi-professionals make up the pro-am corps. Professionalamateurs are a sort of social hybrid, who act as professionals, often on a volunteer basis, but with the motivation of aficionados. For example, Exporail, the Canadian Railway Museum, in Saint-Constant, Quebec, has many former engineers and CN employees who maintain, repair, and restore the locomotives and rail cars in the museum's collection. What would happen to this museum without that pro-am support? Professional-amateurs also take care of the farm machinery on display at the Western Development Museum in Saskatoon and help at many other museums, especially science and technology museums.

- Public participation in museums is becoming more and more about co-operating, contributing, and co-creating, often in connection with exhibit and collection development. The People of the Eye exhibit at the Écomusée du fier monde is a good example of this trend. Will we be seeing more and more co-creation when it comes to collection documentation, research and conservation? In my opinion, public participation should not be limited to museum front lines (i.e. visits, exhibits, and activities). The public should also be involved in the behind-the-scenes work, which may be less visible but is just as important.
- The quality of museums is based less and less on the effectiveness of procedures and more and more on the impact a museum can have on society. As the great museologist Stephen Weil from the Smithsonian Institution said, museums need to transform themselves from "being about something to being for somebody".<sup>v</sup> Given that the 21<sup>st</sup> century museums are in a period of transition and the people they serve are increasingly diverse, there is an expectation that they will listen to those people and meet their needs and expectations, even if public funding is becoming increasingly scarce. Museums have to compete with others for the resources they need. It is by delivering quality services to individuals and society that they will be able to justify their requests for additional resources.

#### Trends in museum renewal



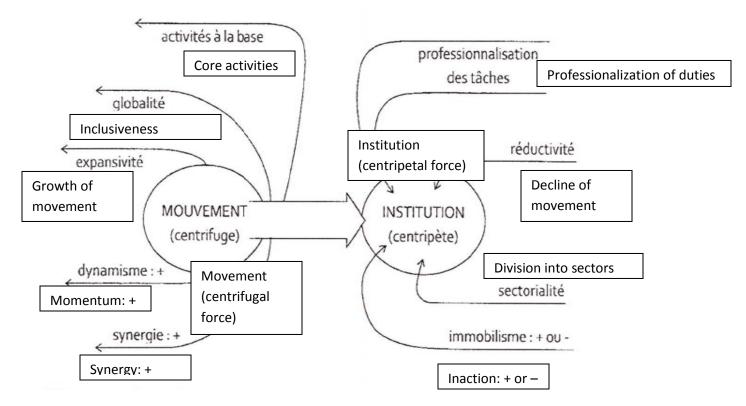
When I first met Per Uno Ågren, museologist and director of the Västerbottens Museum in Umeå in northern Sweden in 1983, we talked a lot about the centrifugal and centripetal forces acting on museums as an institution and the various movements that arise in the museum world from time to time. In museum history, such movements abound. In the 1930s, there was the quasi-Fascist movement to create large museums of man. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was the Victorian naturalist movement to create museums of natural history, and today, there are socialist and populist movements to create citizen museums and ecomuseums. However, there were also revolutionary movements to destroy museums. Parisian students sought to burn down the Louvre in May 1968, and during the Cultural Revolution in China, there were attempts to destroy all the scholarly museums.

Movement and culture are two words that are almost inextricably connected. There cannot be any culture without movements because everything about a culture comes from an internal dynamic. However, the cultural movement is also seen as linear, which leads us to describe certain cultures as outdated, backward, or anachronistic and others as avant-garde, postmodern, or advanced. The cultural movement does not point only forward and upward. It is ongoing and cyclical, and therefore always effervescent.

I believe that movements and the process for creating a museum, for making it into an institution, are in opposition, particularly when curatorial functions result in healthy conservatism, which by nature opposes the slightest movement that might disrupt its assets and habits. This is even more true because trying to fit a museum into a certain box by institutionalizing it poses a threat to the very movement that brought the museum into existence. In the long term, institutionalizing the movement in the form of a museum will cause the movement to dwindle in strength and popularity and to lose its centrifugal force.

Not everyone agrees on the dangers of institutionalization. In a discussion that I had with Hugues de Varine, he indicated that it is critical that movements become institutionalized after initially generating new ideas, representations, projects, and movements so that the movement becomes stable and gains the public's confidence.

It is true that, when an approach becomes more official, it is more stable and more likely to obtain official support, financial benefits, etc. However, one must admit that by pursuing institutionalization, a movement is courting disaster or even its own death. To add to this debate, I propose the argument represented in the diagram below and the following three principles:



Principles:

- All movements tend to become institutionalized.
- Institutionalization tends to destroy movements.
- Every movement must refuse to become institutionalized unless it is sure it will live on through other movements.

What trends are developing in museum renewal that must be taken into account in the coming decades?

- The sustainable development movement is now a concern of museums around the world. In 2015, Peter van Mensch wrote: "Sustainability has been described as 'efficiency with a conscience' and a key aspect of sustainable operation is to use the limited resources that are available efficiently in order to achieve the maximum possible [positive and negative] impact."<sup>vi</sup> This movement brings with it a change in attitude on the part of museum workers. They must find new ways of interpreting collections in order to attract new visitors and make their use of museum resources more sustainable, since sustainability is closely connected with quality.
- The sustainable development movement requires museums to see the cultural, natural, and tangible or intangible aspects of their regional heritage in a more

**general and useful way.** In order to achieve that goal, museums must draw on a number of academic disciplines, museographic techniques, and heritage practices (which are often intangible). They must also consider society's needs and expectations with regard to sustainable development, the fight against climate change, knowledge of renewable energy, and other related subjects.

- The museum renewal movement requires museums to take another look at their perception of society, which, like them, is a social construct and involves power issues. To date, the museum world has been operating at a distance from society. Today, with communication tools 2.0 and even 3.0, museums must change their way of doing things to take into account their source community and their constituent community. Enhancing museum heritage is becoming more and more about sustainable development. It therefore involves an obligation to democratize museums, their tools, their processes, and the new themes resulting from the above-mentioned trends.
- The sustainable development movement requires museums to be transparent and puts an end to their supposed neutrality. In December 2015, Robert Janes, the former director of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary and emeritus editor, published "The End of Neutrality: A Modest Manifesto". <sup>vii</sup> This article eloquently set out many points to consider. It concludes as follows:

"In addition to being value-driven, the competent museum is reality-based. This means becoming more involved in the broader world by embracing a sense of urgency and seeing things as they really are in terms of the challenges to our collective well-being. A fundamental question, as planetary destruction proceeds, is the fate of our social and cultural enterprise - will it diminish or wither away along with every last lump of coal, every last tree, and every last ton of tar sands?" "The essential role of the conscious museum in the twenty-first century is embedded in the undeniable fact that the Western world's, citizen-based democracy is dependent upon participation, and to participate is to be permanently uncomfortable - emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and psychically (Saul, 1995: 190). Museums must embrace this discomfort, including the uncertainty and non-conformity that this requires, in order to become the authentic participants they are equipped to be." "With the demise of neutrality in the museum lexicon, perhaps integrity could assume a preeminent place in contemporary museum practice."

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that most of these trends are leading toward what I call the museology of ideas and issues and toward citizen museums. Again, these trends include:

- Greater citizen participation;
- Protection of at-risk collections;
- Making museums' hidden treasures more visible;

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- Recognizing the importance of social inclusion;
- Getting visitors to think about subjects such as climate change, racism, and human rights;
- Striving to achieve high-quality museums that Canadians can be proud of and will benefit from both today and in the future;
- Etc.

It is important to note that most of the awards given out each year by the Canadian Museums Association and the provincial associations are related to one or more of these trends. I can attest to that because, for the past few years, I have been on the jury that selects the recipients of the Canadian Museums Association's awards of excellence, and I noticed that about three-quarters of the submissions are in keeping with these trends.

## Conclusion

This brief to the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage is not an instruction booklet. Rather, its purpose is to provide some food for thought on how to maintain the well-being of museums, particularly small, medium-sized, local, and regional museums, and to ensure that the sociocultural and economic role they play helps to build community pride and drive community development in this early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I believe that the heritage of museums, historic sites, nature parks, and other symbolic grounds can and must become major proponents of culture, development, and greater pride in our identity. This will lead people to set new goals for themselves, empower them, and result in constructive initiatives that will in turn increase prosperity, encourage corporate innovation, promote faster integration of newcomers, and allow for a better quality of life and a healthier environment.

Heritage is not a cure-all, but having a better idea of who we are and what we can accomplish can make all the difference between a pessimistic and an optimistic society. We must not forget that a society that has become proud—or even better, very proud—of who it is will want to ensure the well-being of its members, will be able to deal with the challenges and adversity it must face, will seek to find solutions to its problems, and will be open-minded and have a vision that will allow it to face the future. Such a society will also be able to share that vision with younger generations.

What can the Parliament of Canada do to help local and regional museums in becoming more involved in society and the community?

It would be very appreciated if the Parliament of Canada could do everything in its power to provide museums with financial assistance—that would certainly be very welcome after the cuts

that have been made in the cultural world in recent years—and to develop innovative programs to:

- Upgrade museums, their infrastructure, exhibits, educational programs, etc.;
- Provide more training for museum staff and volunteers given the growing trends described in this brief;
- Promote regional culture, which is always a source of community pride;
- Help museums make better use of new communications technologies and social networks;
- Create regional storage facilities to better protect at-risk collections; and
- Set up regional advisory boards to assist with exhibits, activities, etc.

I am sure that the many briefs that the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage has received suggest many other ways to improve the state of Canadian museums and make them a real source of national pride. That brings to mind the National Museum of Niger, where I worked in the 1980s. That museum is such a source of pride for Nigeriens that they do not say that they are going to *the* museum, rather, they always say, "I'm going to *my* museum". (http://www.museenationalduniger.ne/)

If needed or desired, I am prepared to help the committee to do everything in its power to help museums.

René Rivard, FAMC

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> Hugues de Varine. "Le musée peut tuer ou… faire vivre". *Techniques et Architecture*, Issue No. 326 (1979), pp. 82-83.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>ii</sup> Hugues de Varine. Ibidem.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>iii</sup> Peter van Mensch and Léontine Meijer. New Trends in Museology II. ICOM-Slovenia, Celtje, 2015. 120 p. <sup>iv</sup> <u>http://inclusivemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/ICOM\_Cultural\_Diversity\_Charter.pdf</u>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Stephen Weil: "Beyond Big and Awesome – Outcome-based Evaluation", in *Museum Management and Marketing*, Routledge, London 2007, pp. 195-204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>vi</sup> Peter van Mensch. Ibidem. P. 73.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>vii</sup> In the Informal Learning Review, Issue No. 135, pp. 3-7.