

SOFT POWER OF CULTURE AND MUSEUMS

Translation into English of remarks by Gail Dexter Lord,
December 8, 2014

THANK YOU Consul General and to the Republic of France for conferring this great honour on me. Thank you to the Director of the Alliance française for nominating me. Thank you all for joining me here today for this celebration. And thank you Barry Lord for inspiring me in everything I do. He is the one who insisted we spend our summers in France and who had the crazy confidence that we could open an office in that great capital of culture. Thank you also to Laure Confavreux Colliex, Director of our Paris office, who met her future husband here at the Alliance française when she was an intern with our Toronto office - and urged me to join the Board of the Alliance. I'd like to turn the conversation toward some lessons I learned from serving on the Alliance française Board. It all revolves around "soft power" -- which is the subject of my forthcoming book with Ngaire Blankenberg "Cities, Museums and Soft Power," to be published by The AAM Press of the American Alliance of Museums in 2015.

Soft power is the ability to influence behavior using persuasion, attraction or agenda-setting. Whereas the resources of "hard power" are tangible—force and finance—soft power resources are intangibles, such as ideas, knowledge, values and culture, including language. Soft power differs from diplomacy in that diplomacy is conducted by states, whereas soft power is conducted through networks of non-state charitable institutions and individuals - and increasingly by cities, which are in the forefront of advocacy on such issues as urban regeneration, public transportation, the environment, poverty and integration of immigrants. Museums play a great role in their cities and in soft power due to their intercultural collections, to their role as urban landmarks and as places where people can gather to gain a deep understanding of past and present and how to shape the future.

The Alliance Française is a classic soft power institution! The network was formed in 1883 by scientist Louis Pasteur, diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps and novelist Jules Verne and established in Toronto in 1902 - which places it a decade before the ROM and just 2 years after the Art Gallery of Toronto (as the AGO was then called) -- and long before Wyndham Lewis characterized Toronto as a "Sanctimonious ice box". As of this year there are 850

Centres in 137 countries. This fully independent non-profit institution, supported morally by France which provides a talented director like Thierry, earns its way through language teaching and cultural activity. While promoting our national identity through the use of our official language, the Alliance also promotes multi-culturalism through its teachers who have moved to Toronto from many countries in which French is the first language. Through its active programmes, films and exhibitions the Alliance exercises soft power by bonding and bridging - bonding people who identify with French culture and creating bridges with those who are interested outsiders.

Speaking French is a window to this culture which is both part of me as a Canadian and apart from me as an English Canadian. And it has been most helpful as Barry and I navigate our way through French museums with the help of our French staff in our Paris office which we established in 2006 as our European Headquarters.

Here are a few examples:

Musee du quai Branley - which opened In 2006 - is the grand project near the Eiffel Tower which presents works as art which were once displayed as systematic ethnographic collections in the Musee de l'homme, formerly called the Musee Trocadero, where Picasso famously 'discovered' African art and changed modern art forever. The new exhibits in Quai Branley present the art of the indigenous peoples of the world (many former French colonies) in an aesthetic mode for our enjoyment and deep appreciation. The museum came under much criticism from English-language curators and museologists for exoticising the cultures and taking the objects out of context. Actually the exhibit hall is filled with films that show how the objects were used in context. But the debate raged fuelled by the distinctly different museum cultures of the Anglophonic and Francophone worlds. The English speaking curators insist on a didactic approach which places explaining through words at the heart of display; while the French privilege beauty. Indeed for the French curator the apprehension of beauty in these hundreds of objects elevated them to the level of great works of art. The English could see only 'paternalism'.

Our task as consultants in this great project was to help the museum engage with the many people living in Paris who are immigrants from the colonies represented in the museum - people who rarely attend French museums. Seemed like a natural fit -- a Canadian company with all

our multi-cultural experience. Right away we encountered a big problem: our concept of multi-culturalism is antithetical to the French idea of citizenship which derives from a revolution that created a secular society in which everyone is *de iure* if not *de facto* (YOU MEAN DE IURE, NOT DE FACTO) equal. So how to invite special groups into the museum when there are by definition no “special groups”? Eventually we came up with the idea that people from Africa and the Pacific Islands were “descendants” of the cultures that produced the artifacts and who therefore had a special knowledge of the collections – and this led to quite good programs in which “descendant people” were invited to present and discuss the cultural objects from their perspectives.

I learned from this the logic of the French way of thinking as distinct from our haphazard experiential approach.

In English culture, we say “That’s fine in theory, but does it work in practice?”

In French culture we say “That’s fine in practice – but does it work in theory?”

This actually helped me understand Quebecois concepts of human rights in my 14 years of work on developing our national museum for human rights in Winnipeg that just opened in September. Quebec civil law is based on the French legal code and consequently Quebec’s ideas about human rights reflect more the French theory of secularism (*laïcité*) than our English ideas of multi-culturalism. This is why Quebec has the most progressive human rights charter in Canada – including the rights of children to have accessible day care and to be free from child-targeted advertising on television. This is one of the motivations behind the proposed law against religious symbolism including headscarves. Freedom of religion is there in the Quebec charter, but it has a lower priority than equality of women. Our lack of understanding of the French perspective on these matters actually inhibits our own interculturalism as Canadians.

You may well wonder what these two institutions could have in common. Well the King Abdul Aziz Centre being built right now at Dhahran in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia is a transformational institution that includes the country’s first public cinema and first public theater as well as a library, 5 museums and children’s museum. It will be one of the few places that men and women can visit together, apart from shopping malls. In the sense that this cultural centre promotes an agenda of opening up society, it is an engine of soft power. The

Center Pompidou was the result of the social change demanded as part of the 1968 revolutions against cultural elitism. The Centre Pompidou has had and continues to have a strong social agenda to integrate contemporary and modern art with people. Because our Paris office was helping the Pompidou center to circulate its collection of video art and our Toronto office was working with the Saudi project to plan its exhibitions and programs, we came up with the idea of brokering a partnership between them which resulted in an MOU being signed and a major exhibition on the theme of “colour” of 20 paintings from the Pompidou collection – including one painting by Picasso whose work had never before been shown in Saudi Arabia. This is one of the first international art exhibitions ever in Saudi. It was displayed in a special climate controlled tent erected by Aramco, the Saudi Energy Company in Dhahran in 2012. This is one of many exhibition collaborations between the two cultural centres – soft power in action.

The transformation of La Monnaie, the Paris Mint from the production of hard currency to a center for the arts and crafts that make money beautiful is a transformation from hard power to soft power which invites people to think of the cultural aspects of money. We are seeing more and more projects for banks world-wide that want to reinforce the power of financial systems by explaining the cultural roots of money and exchange. Perhaps this is the soft edge of hard power. Our Paris team has been working on this project for the past 5 years and the recent opening of this great building on the Seine creates another cultural space for the enjoyment of Parisians and their millions of visitors.

One of our most exciting projects is in Bordeaux where we are helping the City to plan and establish *la Cité des civilisations du vin* on the Garonne river. Despite the fact that Bordeaux has been synonymous with the wine industry for hundreds of years, it has lacked an iconic place where people can study and learn about the culture of wine past present and future and its international dimensions – most especially now that France is exporting its wine-making techniques to Canada (where it is the basis for our successful Niagara region) and most recently to China. Our role was to develop the concept, the business plan and assist the city to select the architect X-Tu of France through a competition process for the building and for exhibitions, Casson Mann of London. The large goal of this project is to inspire people to experience fully the sensual joys of wine – something I invite you to do as part of tonight’s celebration. ♦