

ACCESSIBILITY IN MUSEUMS: HOW TO COMBINE ACCESSIBLE SPACES, TECHNOLOGY, AND “SHARED LANGUAGES” TO ENSURE THE INCLUSION OF ALL VISITORS

ACCESSIBILITÀ NEI MUSEI: COME CONIUGARE SPAZI ACCESSIBILI, TECNOLOGIA E “LINGUAGGI CONDIVISI” PER GARANTIRE L'INCLUSIONE DI TUTTI I VISITATORI

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the “vital” issue of social justice within museum contexts, aiming to analyze and reflect on the dynamics of inclusion and equity within these cultural institutions. Museums hold significant cultural and social importance, but often run the risk of perpetuating inequality and discrimination. The research focuses on identifying strategies and best practices to ensure increased accessibility and participation of all stakeholders in museum life, regardless of socioeconomic, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds.

Questo studio si addentra nella “vitale” questione della giustizia sociale nei contesti dei musei, mirando ad analizzare e riflettere sulle dinamiche di inclusione ed equità all'interno di queste istituzioni culturali. I musei rivestono un'importanza culturale e sociale significativa, ma spesso corrono il rischio di perpetuare fattori di disuguaglianza e discriminazione. La ricerca si concentra sull'identificazione di strategie e migliori pratiche per garantire una maggiore accessibilità e partecipazione di tutti gli attori della vita museale, indipendentemente dallo sfondo socioeconomico, culturale o etnico.

KEYWORDS

Social Justice, Museum Education, Inclusion, Equity, Cultural Institutions.

Giustizia Sociale, Educazione Museale, Inclusione, Equità, Istituzioni Culturali.

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Introduction

This study aims to explore the issue of social justice in museum contexts, setting as its primary objective the analysis and reflection on the dynamics of inclusion and equity within such institutions. Museums, while celebrated for their contributions to education and culture, also bear the responsibility of addressing historical inequalities and fostering inclusivity. This topic is of crucial importance, as museums represent places of great cultural and social relevance, but they often risk perpetuating inequality and discrimination of various kinds. Therefore, in this introduction, the following aspects will be examined: the statement of the research issue and the importance of Social Justice in museum context. This research will focus on identifying strategies and best practices aimed at ensuring greater accessibility and participation of all stakeholders in museum life, regardless of socioeconomic, cultural, or ethnic background. The analysis of the dynamics of inclusion and social justice in museums aims to provide important insights and action points for a society increasingly attentive to the values of solidarity, inclusion, and respect for diversity. Specifically, museum education should take into account the “tensions” present in contemporary society and promote an ethic of “equality” and “mutual recognition” (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019). This requires museum staff to be constantly updated with respect to current regulations and the aspirations of the population. Today, this general principle can be declined in the theme of inclusion, which requires museums to go beyond facade inclusion and promote a real cultural readiness to “rethink” and “redesign” the ways, times, and places by which a museum educationally welcomes visitors. This research endeavor aims to centralize the discourse surrounding the theme of social justice within the milieu of museum environments, with a specific emphasis on conducting comparative analyses among various museum case studies, predominantly drawn from Switzerland, United States and Italy.

1. The importance of social justice in museum settings: a DEAI (Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion) approach to “rethink” and “redesign” museums

This study aims to explore the issue of social justice in museum contexts, setting as its primary objective the analysis and reflection on the dynamics of inclusion and equity within such institutions. Museums, as spaces of cultural representation, thrive when they embrace diversity, provide equitable opportunities, ensure access for all, and foster an inclusive environment. The discussion here emphasizes the

sybiotic relationship between social principles and the mission of museums to be agents of social change. In this section, the following aspects will be examined: 1) diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion (DEAI) Framework; 2) the role of Museums in Promoting DEAI; 3) DEAI's Impact on Museum Attendance and Visitor Satisfaction. Compared to the national context, In the United States and the United Kingdom, more attention is paid to “restricting” (do not expose/don't exhibit anymore) collections that might arouse opposition from ethnic minorities in certain museums, such as those of African Americans or Native Americans, in order to avoid offending or hurting anyone's sensibilities and to prevent possible legal action against museums displaying certain objects. This issue is known as “social justice in museums” in the English-speaking world and is related to the concepts of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, becoming increasingly relevant in Italy as well. Getting into specifics, this concept was coined to refer to a systemic approach to the management of organizations, which promotes diversity and inclusion in all aspects of its activities and can be declined in museum contexts (Shaindlin, 2020). “Diversity” refers to the variety of backgrounds, experiences, cultures, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, disabilities, and other individual characteristics that people bring with them. “Equity” refers to the promotion of equality of opportunity in order to eliminate barriers that prevent people from realizing their full potential. “Accessibility” refers to the creation of accessible environments and products for people with disabilities. “Inclusion” refers to the promotion and acceptance of people who are different in all aspects in the museum, creating an environment in which each person feels respected, valued and included. DEAI has become an increasingly important concept in many museums, as it promotes equality and inclusion, enhances museum attendance, and promotes creativity and visitor satisfaction. The preparation of the museum director and curators on issues of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion becomes critical in these circumstances, as he or she must urge staff to pay close attention to these issues to avoid inaccuracies or regulatory violations, which could generate significant media “uproar”.

2. Interpreting the Sense of Uncanny: Psychological Perspectives, PEGI, and Museum Experiences.

In this paragraph we will delve into a specific theme: on a cognitive level, inequality, non-inclusion and injustice cause an emotional reaction in a person which often ranges from disgust, anger or at a lighter level a sense of the uncanny, here we will take the latter into consideration. The expression *sense of uncanny*, or restlessness,

in psychology can be interpreted in various ways depending on the context in which it is used and the psychological theories considered (Galimberti, 2021, p.919). However, it refers to an emotional or psychological state characterized by a feeling of discomfort, anxiety, restlessness, or agitation. Here are some more common interpretations of *sense of uncanny*: 1) *general anxiety*, the sense of restlessness can be associated with general anxiety, which is a condition in which a person experiences constant worry, tension, and diffuse fear without a specific cause. This sense of restlessness can manifest through physical symptoms (such as tremors, sweating, and muscle tension) and emotional symptoms (such as nervousness, irritability, and excessive worry); 2) *existential discomfort*, in some psychological theories, the sense of restlessness can refer to a feeling of dissatisfaction or restlessness related to human existence and questions about life, the meaning of life, mortality, and other philosophical themes. This restlessness can lead people to seek a deeper meaning or explore their own beliefs and values; 3) *state of uncertainty or indecision*, the sense of restlessness can also refer to a state in which a person finds themselves in a situation of uncertainty or indecision, not knowing what to do or which direction to take. This can cause a feeling of discomfort and restlessness due to a lack of clarity or a defined path; 4) *emotional restlessness*, in some contexts, the sense of restlessness can be linked to an emotional state in which a person feels troubled or agitated without an apparent cause (Ibidem); 5) finally, a disturbing/uncanny effect may exist when *human-machine interaction* occurs (especially with new robotic and artificial intelligence systems), it refers to something that is strange, or unsettling because it is familiar yet unfamiliar, creating a sense of discomfort or unease, this feeling of the uncanny can arise in various contexts, including art, literature, and human-machine interaction (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, 1999; MacDorman, 2005; Brenton & Alii, 2005; Mori, MacDorman, Kageki, 2012; Saygin & Alii, 2012; Conte, 2012; Kätsyri & Alii, 2015). This negative response is attributed to the digital characters falling into a perceptual “valley” on a graph of human-likeness versus likability.

Why should museum education, museum directors and curators deal with the topic of the uncanny? It is possible for a sense of unease to occur in museums, especially in children, but also in adults. This can be due to several reasons: 1) *disturbing content or objects*, some museums may host exhibitions or displays that include objects or content deemed disturbing or frightening. For example, an art museum might feature works with “obscene” or “macabre” themes, or a historical museum might exhibit artifacts related to tragic or violent events. These elements can evoke unease in visitors of all ages or in special cases (think about the different characteristics of the visitors: cultures, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations,

etc.); 2) *quiet and solemn atmosphere*, many museums require quiet and respectful behavior, with a silent and solemn atmosphere. This environment can make some visitors, especially children, feel nervous or uneasy if they are not accustomed to this type of atmosphere (the solemn atmosphere can disinhibit the potential of play-educational activities that are very appropriate for children); 3) *abstract or experimental art*, some contemporary art pieces or experimental exhibits can be challenging to understand or interpret, which might generate unease or “confusion”, with respect to the interpretation of works of art, in visitors (interpretations that are sometimes trivializing or ridiculing of what is exposed); 4) *fear of the unknown*, children, in particular, may be susceptible to a fear of the unknown, so objects or artworks that appear strange or mysterious could trigger unease. To address these situations, it's important for parents or accompanying adults (educators) to prepare children adequately by explaining what to expect and answering their questions; if this is not possible, the technologies that mediate the installations should carry out this very delicate task. The signage should anticipate the content of the room, say whether it is suitable for everyone, whether it can arouse certain protests due to the content, advise whether the content is for everyone, etc. For example, it may happen that a very young child becomes frightened when he sees human skeletons in an archaeological museum. It is better to notify educators to decide how to present the contents of the rooms. Based on what has been said so far, a curator might consider something similar to the classification system PEGI¹ at the entrance of the various museum exhibition halls, a multilingual iconographic system for visitors and the parents of visitors. This encourages curators to contemplate what they are displaying in the galleries and how they are doing so. the PEGI system was not designed to be used in museums or other cultural or educational contexts but as a classifier of the characteristics of APPs and video games. However, in museums and exhibitions, it is common to provide detailed information about the content of the displays so that visitors can make informed decisions about their visit. This information may include a brief description of the theme or content of the exhibited works, as well as warnings regarding potentially disturbing or age-inappropriate content. Instead of using the PEGI system, museums can adopt more specific and detailed communication strategies to provide guidance to visitors on the level of unease or appropriateness of the exhibits. This system actually labels the elements of fear, sexual content, vulgar language, racism and other characteristics that can give rise to problems in terms of the DEAI approach. This may involve creating informational cards,

¹ <https://pegi.info/what-do-the-labels-mean>

explanatory labels, or using educational staff who can answer visitors' questions and guide them through the exhibits appropriately. Furthermore, museums often aim to balance educational and cultural content with sensitivity to different audiences, so that important themes can be addressed without causing excessive unease or discomfort among visitors. Returning to a previously raised point, to avoid a *quiet and solemn atmosphere* the curator and the director of a museum navigate between their aesthetic needs and the socio-cultural ones which are in a certain sense *secularized* and have to deal with the needs of the time they live, of their public, of the common sensibility that varies and has new needs. At the same time, a director should take into account that restlessness and information memorization, in fact, emotions also affect the ability to learn and memorize information (Wolfe, 2006; Forgas, 2023). Restlessness can have a negative effect on the ability to learn and remember information conveyed in a museum. Therefore, museum operators should consider the impact of emotions on visitors' learning process. Likewise, it is good to remember that emotion is closely related to the arrangement of exhibits: the architecture and arrangement of objects within the museum can influence the visitor's emotion. In particular, the arrangement of objects can contribute to an emotional experience that can affect the perception of the artwork. Museum operators should consider the importance of creating exhibition spaces that are able to generate positive emotions in visitors. Technology can also be used to generate emotion and engagement in visitors. The emotional experience that is generated through the use of technology can be different from the traditional experience based on direct enjoyment of works of art. Museum operators should consider the importance of using technology effectively to create engaging emotional experiences. The emotional experience associated with visiting a museum can contribute to the formation of visitors' cultural identity. In particular, the emotional experience can affect the perception of artworks and culture in general. Museum operators should consider the importance of creating emotional experiences that are able to form a strong cultural identity in visitors.

2. A first case study: the Musée d'ethnographie in Neuchâtel how emotions are closely related to the arrangement of exhibits

Understanding the inclusiveness of a museum requires a critical assessment of situations in which such inclusiveness is compromised, such as when the principle of social justice is violated or when the exhibition itinerary may be inappropriate

for certain audiences. In the case of the Musée d'ethnographie in Neuchâtel², Switzerland, these factors seem to indicate a lack of inclusiveness. We will now examine the curators' reasons for intentionally not eliciting criticism, with the aim of assessing whether these reasons are well-founded and consistent with the museum's exhibition goals. Statues and reproductions with religious themes can indeed evoke mixed emotions in a museum environment, particularly in ethnographic museums that may decontextualize these religious artifacts. This decontextualization can lead to both disturbance and appreciation, but the response largely depends on the visitor's perspective. Here are a few key reasons for this: *decontextualization*, in ethnographic museums, religious artifacts are often removed from their original sacred context and placed within a secular environment. This separation from their original religious settings can be disturbing to some individuals who view it as a form of desecration or disrespect towards the sacred; *cultural sensitivity*, visitors from religious backgrounds may have strong emotional connections to these artifacts and may find their display outside of a religious context unsettling. They might feel that the objects are being reduced to mere curiosities rather than revered symbols of faith; *aesthetic appreciation*, on the other hand, some visitors may appreciate the religious artifacts for their artistic and historical value. They may see them as valuable cultural and historical artifacts that can be studied and appreciated for their craftsmanship and historical significance; *educational value*, Ethnographic museums often aim to educate visitors about different cultures and belief systems. In some cases, the decontextualization of religious artifacts can be seen as a way to promote cross-cultural understanding and dialogue, allowing people to learn about and respect the diversity of world religions. *respect for sacred spaces*, the mention of diocesan and archbishop museums highlights the importance of respecting the sacred.

² it should be noted that the city has a museum tradition, it hosting the aforementioned museum boasts a considerable number of museums. One need only consider the presence of the museum dedicated to the La Tène culture (Bochnak, Kazakevych, 2023, p.68), named after the locality on the northern shores of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland. This culture held dominance in central Europe, particularly in the realm of art. Artifacts pertaining to the La Tène culture have been unearthed across an expansive geographical expanse, encompassing Western and Central Europe from Ireland to Romania. Additionally, the region also houses discoveries from the Roman era.



Figure 1. The Musée d'ethnographie in Neuchâtel, Switzerland^{3,4}. This showcase may cause disappointment for certain people, in fact the exhibits for some people are cult objects.



Figure 2. The Musée d'ethnographie in Neuchâtel, Switzerland⁵, This showcase may cause disappointment for certain people, in fact the exhibits for some people are cult objects.

In these museums, there is a deliberate effort to maintain the sacredness and context of religious artifacts, which can create a more reverential and less

³ In accordance with the guidelines titled "Copyright Law - Practical Knowledge for Museums" by the Swiss Museums Association, the reproduction of artworks, even for internal documentation purposes and scientific endeavors, is not permissible without prior authorization. The same restriction applies to reproductions intended for informational purposes, such as for inclusion in a database. It is to be emphasized that, in this response, no photographs of the mentioned author have been included. More info: https://www.museums.ch/it/assets/files/dossiers_i/Standards/VMS_Urheberrecht_20_I_web_neu.pdf Retrieved [August 18, 2023, 2023]

⁴<https://www.men.ch/en/exhibitions/spotlight/the-impermanence-of-things#&gid=lightbox-group-10206&pid=4> [August 18, 2023, 2023]

⁵<https://www.men.ch/en/exhibitions/spotlight/the-impermanence-of-things#&gid=lightbox-group-10206&pid=6> [August 18, 2023, 2023]

disturbing environment for visitors of that faith. In summary, statues and reproductions with religious themes in ethnographic museums can evoke mixed emotions due to the decontextualization of sacred objects. Some may view it as disturbing or disrespectful, while others may appreciate it from an educational or historical perspective. The difference in reactions underscores the complexity of presenting religious artifacts in a museum setting and the importance of cultural sensitivity in curatorial decisions. In brief, sometimes the concept of sacred space is little respected between neighboring/similar cultures, perhaps this is precisely the case with this museum, located in a city that acts as a link between the Protestant society and the Catholic society. In this territorial hinge, what was once fought with weapons has now been reduced to small “disagreements” which however can generate problems that fall within the theme of the DEAI. In addition to what has been described so far which concerns the museum's permanent exhibition, there is the situation relating to a temporary exhibition at the same museum which should be studied in terms of DEAI. It explores the concept of “sauvage” (wild)⁶ from a social sciences perspective. It emphasizes the term's ambiguity, varying based on speakers, contexts, and cultural values. For an ethnographic museum, this theme delves into notions of otherness and challenges persisting stereotypes. In today's context, where progress induces anxiety, the concept of the wild transforms from a negative received idea (or *cliché*) to representing alternative solutions to societal issues.



Figure 3. The Musée d'ethnographie in Neuchâtel, Switzerland⁷, temporary exhibition “l'impossible sauvage” (19.06.2022 – 14.05.2023)
<https://www.men.ch/fr/expositions/a-laffiche/limpossible-sauvage>

⁶ <https://www.men.ch/fr/expositions/a-laffiche/limpossible-sauvage>

⁷ <https://www.men.ch/en/exhibitions/spotlight/the-impermanence-of-things#&gid=lightbox-group-10206&pid=6> [August 18, 2023, 2023]

The exhibition takes visitors through urban and natural landscapes, highlighting three distinct imaginaries, then explores their limitations. It concludes with a portrayal of an utopian space, blurring the line between wild and domestic. This innovative exhibition spans all three floors of the Black Box at the Museum of Ethnography in Neuchâtel. This exhibition, which explores the concept of “sauvage” from various angles, reflects the complexities of presenting cultural and religious artifacts in ethnographic museums. Just as the decontextualization of religious artifacts in such museums can evoke diverse responses, the interpretation of “sauvage” also hinges on the visitor's perspective. This highlights the need for cultural sensitivity in curatorial decisions, as visitors may either find the separation from the original context disturbing or appreciate it for its educational and historical value, much like how religious artifacts can be seen in ethnographic museums. The exhibition underscores the importance of fostering cross-cultural understanding while respecting the sacredness of certain artifacts, similar to the efforts made in diocesan and archbishop museums to maintain the sacred context of religious objects.

3. A second third case study: Illinois State Museum, Advancing an Ethics of Equality Through DEAI Philosophy and Cultural Sensitivity

In the United States, the Illinois State Museum was among the first to address this issue according to the DEAI philosophy, and it is good to know that the museum presents permanent and temporary exhibitions on the various disciplines represented, with a focus on Illinois natural history, American Indian culture, and the history of the people of Illinois. In addition, the museum offers educational and research programs for the public, such as educational workshops, special events, and study programs for students and researchers; the museum is committed to promoting understanding and appreciation of Illinois natural history and culture, and to working with local communities to share its knowledge and resources. In addition, the museum is committed to preserving and protecting the collections in its care to ensure their long-term availability and enjoyment. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko⁸, the Director of the Illinois State Museum, highlights the complex issues of racism and racial tensions that plague cities in the Midwestern United States, particularly those belonging to the Peoria and Kickapoo territories, which have suffered forced removal from their native lands. In this context, the creation of museum exhibits should demonstrate a particular “sensitivity” to their plight and

⁸ Illinois State Museum (2020), *The Inclusive Museum*:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za6OFYthSLg&ab_channel=IllinoisStateMuseum

help give voice to the local and national community regarding this issue. Similar dynamics may manifest themselves in the countries of South America, Africa, and Indochina that have gone through the process of decolonization, as well as in Italy, where the wounds caused by wars and historical vicissitudes have left deep marks, which fortunately are not much but due to certain online press it is unfortunately on the rise⁹. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the analyzed process, it is essential not only to ensure the coexistence of different cultures but also to create a political space in which these differences can interact cross-culturally. Only through such a practice will it be possible to promote an ethics of equality that surpasses the ethics of mutual recognition (Colazzo, Manfreda, 2019, p. 151). In order to promote a society characterized by a decrease in the overall rate of cruelty and the expression of forms of solidarity, it is necessary for museums to create spaces for the organization of observatories, debates, and publications that can promote this ideal. According to Colazzo and Manfreda (2019), there are four forms of mutual recognition that need to be taken into account in all contexts, including museums, and they relate to the demands for recognition of individuals, primary groups, minority cultures, and national communities, as well as the entire human race. However, these demands for recognition may conflict with each other, generating what Berthoz (2011) refers to as “ancillary complexity”. Moreover, museums must be alert to these conflicts and seek to resolve them in order to promote the ethics of equality.

4. A third case study: the *Congregation of Mercy* and the complexity of the distinction between meritorious organizations and fanatical groups

The previous case study, relating to the Illinois museum, highlights the differences in cultural approaches from country to country. In light of this, this case study

⁹ Examples testifying to such national press dynamics include the events of Pontelandolfo and Casalduni. The events are revealed in the violent repression of the popular revolts that took place in these two cities of Sannio, in southern Italy, in November 1861. Resuming such events today can be biased in a nation that has made hard sacrifices to be united and to remain united after two World Wars. However, controversy must be taken into account when deciding to create an exhibition that "everyone will like".

highlights these mutual misunderstandings which often have media and journalistic resonances. Below is a brief historical introduction to get into the perspective of this case study: the *Congregation of Mercy* is a Catholic religious organization founded in the 17th century in France by St. Vincent de Paul. Its main purpose is to spread "God's mercy" through works of charity and assistance to the poor, sick and needy. The Congregation was founded for the purpose of promoting the practice of Christian charity and mercy toward the needy. In particular, members of the congregation are committed to serving the marginalized people in society, such as the poor, the sick, the elderly and abandoned children. It has been active throughout the world for many years and has played a key role in assisting and caring for people in need.



Figure 4. *Congregation of Mercy*, external front painting at the Church of S. Biagio in Nola (NA), Italy.

Among the congregation's activities are care for the homeless, care for the terminally ill and care for abandoned or orphaned children. In addition, the Congregation is also dedicated to the spiritual formation of its members and to promoting greater involvement of the faithful in the practice of Christian charity. Members of the congregation are expected to live by high standards of morality and religious devotion, and to commit themselves full-time to their mission of community service. The phenomenon of ignorance or confusion between meritorious organizations and *fanatical groups* is an issue that requires critical reflection on the complexity of the contemporary social and political landscape. The confusion can emerge from several sources, including lack of correct and complete information, political *propaganda*, or the spread of stereotypes and prejudices. One of the main risks of confusion is the possibility of confusing meritorious

organizations with extremist or fanatical groups, which may have an agenda radically opposed to that of the former. This can lead to negative consequences, such as loss of trust in civil society and increased political polarization. Such is the case with a 2017 journalistic article¹⁰, which reports in its own words a description of another Italian religious festival called *La Festa di San Rocco*, which features men wearing white hoods similar to those of members of the domestic terrorist organization that was founded shortly after the end of the United States Civil War and flogging themselves with whips until they bleed. The festival has ancient historical roots and is a tradition that is practiced every year (when it is practiced every seven anni). However, according to author Jasmine Stone, the practice of self-harm, which is associated with faith and sacrifice, has raised, in America and certainly not in Italy, some controversy and criticism from some human rights organizations. The article does not provide an in-depth assessment of the opinions for and against this practice, but simply highlights the existence of different reactions and views on the issue. In this article, Jasmine Stone appears to be misinformed about the religious rite in question as well as the date of its celebration. The sole purpose of the article seems to be to arouse the curiosity of readers by showing masked individuals reminiscent of extremist or fanatical groups imagery, in order to increase the number of clicks and to satisfy both those who are interested in learning more about the issue out of indignation and those who harbor unseemly sympathies. Respect for cultures is crucial; when they are extrapolated they become a caricature, and another potential consequence is the emergence of a culture of erasure or censorship, in which people seek to eliminate or obscure ideas or opinions that do not match their beliefs. This kind of attitude can lead to an erosion of freedom of thought and expression, with negative consequences for democracy and social coexistence. To avoid these risks, it is essential to promote critical knowledge of meritorious organizations and fanatical groups, and to develop the ability to distinguish between them. In addition, it is necessary to promote history and culture correctly and comprehensively, so as to avoid the spread of stereotypes and prejudices that can fuel unawareness and confusion. Offenses to religious feelings can be caused by various factors, such as the use of blasphemous or vulgar words or images concerning deities, sacred texts, or places of worship. In addition, disrespect for religious rites or ceremonies can be perceived as offensive. Criticism and irreverence toward religious beliefs and practices may also provoke feelings of offense. In addition, some forms of art or

¹⁰ <https://www.2oceansvibe.com/2017/08/24/italian-religious-festival-features-men-in-white-kkk-style-hats-who-beat-themselves-until-they-bleed/> [August 18, 2023, 2023]

entertainment that treat religious themes in a disrespectful or satirical manner may be considered offensive by the faithful. Finally, discrimination based on religion or the use of religion as a pretext for acts of violence can be equally offensive to believers. To systematize what has just been said with the concept of DEAI, it is important to consider that freedom of expression and protection of the rights of religious minorities can coexist. Instead of emphasizing *cancel culture* (Ng, 2020), which can lead to censorship and restriction of freedom of expression, it is necessary to promote respectful and open dialogue between the various communities, respecting the dignity and rights of each. This requires a balanced approach that takes into account the sensitivities of people belonging to different religious or cultural groups, but at the same time does not restrict freedom of expression and thought. Similarly, The *cancel culture* may pose a risk to the protection and preservation of cultural property in that it may lead to the elimination or removal of works of art, monuments or other forms of cultural expression that may be considered offensive or problematic by some groups or individuals. This could deprive future generations of the opportunity to know and understand the past and culture of an era. It could also prevent critical discussion and debate on the important issues raised by these works of art, denying the opportunity to learn from history and create constructive dialogue about cultural diversity (Zúñiga, 2003; Subedi, 2008; Skubikowski, Wright, Graf, 2023).

5. Advancing Museum Accessibility: Integrating Technology and Inclusive Design for All Visitors

Information, communication, and adaptive technologies enable open learning modalities and facilitate activities with heterogeneous groups of individuals and children. These technologies **serve** as a *common language* that can be customized to meet one's specific needs and characteristics (EADSNE, 2012). At the same time, in contemporary museum and educational spaces, there is a growing integration of multimedia tools to enhance the sensory immersion in art and its historical context. This immersion is achieved through techniques such as spatial reconstructions, interactive scenarios, and advanced technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality. This approach benefits both visitors, who enjoy greater autonomy in experiencing art, and the cultural industry, which can create diverse, accessible, and emotionally engaging exhibitions by blending various forms of communication (Belardi, Menchetelli, 2023, pp.36-37). In this regard, technology **serves** both the

visitor, who is granted autonomy in the enjoyment of artistic content, and the cultural industry, which can establish a multitude of levels of integration between traditional exhibition proposals and the various available tools. These levels range from advanced representation techniques such as the use of photographic enlargements, video projections, and holograms to virtual reality, where viewers are immersed in a virtual context through the use of headsets, and augmented reality, which involves the activation of multimedia content that can be triggered on demand, synchronized in real-time with virtual objects within the real scene (Ibidem). Moreover, in agreement with Belardi and Menchetelli, this integration extends to multisensorial experiences, allowing for the activation of visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, kinesthetic, and multimodal content on request. It also encompasses widespread accessibility, characterized by the absence of architectural barriers, non-discriminatory design solutions, a wide variety of ways to enjoy the content, universal design principles, and differentiated experiential modes tailored for various user categories. Additionally, it involves the creative fusion of different modes of communication, including technological, narrative, educational, informational, emotional, and perceptual languages, culminating in the construction of complex emotional scenarios that can be replicated across different contexts (Ivi, pp.36-37). The future accessible museum combines the accessibility of spaces, the ability to “touch” artworks, and sign language guides with technology. The accessibility of art cannot be generalized, but must be ensured by respecting all types of disabilities. For the physically disabled, an accessible museum must, not should¹¹, have accessible rooms and provide accessibility with appropriately sized ramps, elevators, doors, and lifting platforms. For the deaf, accessible museums should provide guided tours with LIS¹² interpreters (or pre-register videos), sign language descriptions, subtitles during video exhibitions, and written descriptions of artworks. For the visually impaired, accessibility is possible through the presence of detailed audio guides, tactile pathways, raised guides, and descriptions of works in Braille, enlarged versions, etc. For the intellectually disabled, simple communication and the activation of suitable routes is required. Convenient spaces and the availability of comfortable seating are important

¹¹ Read the Italian law as a reference: Legge 5 febbraio 1992, n. 104. *Legge-quadro per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle persone handicappate*.

<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1992/02/17/092G0108/sg>

¹² Italian Sign Language (LIS) is not a mere abbreviation of Italian or a mimicry of it like Morse code or Braille. It's not just a basic manual alphabet or a tool to assist in spoken language expression. Rather, LIS is a distinct language complete with its own set of grammatical, syntactic, morphological, and lexical rules. <https://www.ens.it/lingua-dei-segni/>

elements in ensuring museum accessibility for the elderly as well. In addition, considering the number and location of seating within exhibition rooms should not be seen as a sacrifice of design, but as an opportunity to integrate functional elements with aesthetic ones, thus ensuring a pleasant and comfortable experience for all visitors. Attention to museum usability and accessibility is a central issue in today's cultural debate and represents an ethical and social commitment on the part of cultural institutions to ensure access and active participation in culture for all citizens (EC, 2012). To ensure that museums are also accessible to people with physical disabilities, it is essential that these spaces be designed to meet specific accessibility requirements. This shows the importance of ensuring the accessibility of information to all visitors, including those with hearing disabilities, in order to enable full participation in artistic and cultural enjoyment. In addition, it would be appropriate for museums to adopt articulated and dynamic standards for the presentation of information and works, so as to ensure accessible and uniform enjoyment, regardless of the location and type of museum visited. For people with visual impairments, accessibility to museums is possible through the presence of detailed audio guides with explanations of the works on display, tactile pathways, relief guides. The challenge facing museums is to ensure accessibility for all, respecting the diversity of disabilities, through inclusive design and the adoption of technological and non-technological solutions to make a museum visit an inclusive and engaging experience for all visitors. Besides, the integration of multimedia tools, virtual reality, and augmented reality in contemporary museum and educational spaces represents a significant advancement in enhancing the sensory immersion of visitors in art and its historical context. However, as technology attempts to replicate the real world with increasing fidelity, it can inadvertently lead to the phenomenon of *Uncanny Valley* previously described. While the integration of advanced technologies in museums enhances the visitor experience, it's crucial to be mindful of this effect, where the pursuit of realism may inadvertently result in unsettling experiences for visitors, and it is necessary to avoid that the virtualization of the environment brings back or generates critical issues with respect to the DEAI approach described at length previously also through the proposed case studies

Conclusions

One of the fundamental tasks of museum culture and cultural heritage preservation is to interrogate objects whenever new questions can be posed by emerging technologies. Among these technologies, the reference is to the new digital environments that enable visitors not only to access information but also to experiment and create original meanings. It is precisely this process that allows artworks and cultural artifacts to convey information, knowledge, and emotions, transforming over time and undergoing resynthesis (Luigini, Panciroli, 2023, p.23). The holistic examination of the relationship between museums, social justice, and inclusion presented in this paper underscores the pivotal role museums hold as transformative agents within our society. As repositories of culture, knowledge, and history, museums wield a profound influence over the way we perceive, understand, and appreciate the diverse tapestry of human experience. For this reason museums can become a bridge between different cultures, near or far, and technologies, through customization and artificial intelligence, can become the translator of worlds that initially “do not understand each other” but which can begin to dialogue through a virtuous circle. This exploration has underscored the pressing need for museums to not only acknowledge their responsibility in addressing historical inequalities but also to actively engage with these issues. The DEAI perspective, with its core principles of Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion, has emerged as a guiding light in this endeavor. It is clear that adopting this perspective is not merely a choice but an ethical “imperative” for museums to fulfill their potential as inclusive, accessible, and equitable institutions. Collaboration among museums, communities, scholars, and policymakers remains essential in this shared mission. By working together, the institutions can exchange ideas, experiences, and solutions to address the unique challenges faced by different cultural contexts and institutions. Ultimately, action is the linchpin of progress: museums must actively dismantle the barriers that hinder inclusivity, whether they are physical, sensory, or intellectual. It is “tassative” that museums prioritize education, training, and awareness initiatives for their staff to ensure that the principles of diversity, equity, access, and inclusion are integrated into every facet of museum operations. In doing so, museums have the opportunity to transcend their traditional roles and become catalysts for societal transformation. They can create a cultural landscape that not only reflects the principles of social justice and inclusion but actively contributes to shaping a more just, equitable, and compassionate world. This endeavor is not only a responsibility but also a privilege, one that empowers museums to be at the forefront of positive change, enriching the lives of all who engage with them. What can be a shared language to ensure

inclusion for all visitors to a museum from the concept of DEAI? To ensure inclusion for all visitors to a museum, a *common and shared language* could be a mix of different modes of communication that fit the needs of all visitors, including: 1) *clear and simple language*, use easy-to-understand language to ensure that information is accessible to all visitors, regardless of their level of education or language proficiency; 2) *multimedia learning preferences of visitors*: provide information through different media such as images, video, audio, and text to meet the different teaching-learning processes (for example, Braille and tactile communication, providing information through tactile signage or braille writing for visitors who are blind or visually impaired; subtitles and sign language interpreters: provide subtitles or sign language interpreters for visitors with hearing impairments); 3) *ensure physical accessibility* to museum areas for visitors with mobility disabilities; The acknowledgment of the body as a protagonist in the process of perceiving and interacting with environments stands as a central element in the discourse on social justice and equity. Moreover, the *awareness* that the *body* is closely tied to emotional and affective experiences shapes our understanding of the surrounding world. Consequently, integrating the body's perspective into urban planning policies and outdoor education can markedly enhance the learning experience and render spaces more accessible and inclusive for all, including individuals with disabilities; 4) *ensure that museum staff are trained* to welcome and assist visitors with special needs to ensure that all visitors are treated fairly and respectfully. A holistic approach that takes all these aspects into consideration can help ensure that the museum is inclusive for all visitors, regardless of their ability, age, ethnicity, or cultural background as seen previously. The DEAI perspective constitutes a pivotal approach for addressing inequalities and fostering a more inclusive and just society. In an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world, the recognition and appreciation of diversity become essential elements in the design museums. The DEAI approach advances equity, striving to overcome structural inequalities that constrain access to resources and opportunities. Nevertheless, its implementation may encounter challenges linked to resistance to change and partial adoption of policies and practices. It is imperative to avoid the risk of falling into tokenism, whereby diverse individuals are superficially included without addressing the real barriers that hinder full and equal participation. Nonetheless, embracing the DEAI perspective presents substantial opportunities to enhance existing policies and practices, cultivating welcoming and inclusive environments in both urban contexts and cultural institutions.

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