Manichean museums:

I know reflections around the theme of the ethical museum will surely address very sensitive issues as the ones proposed by FIHRM in the call for papers. However, I want to discuss what seems to be perceived as an almost irrelevant problem with no ethical implications: the tendency to deliberately ignore historical facts that may threaten the “good image” of historical characters. This natural predisposition to defend the legacy of national heroes or public personalities, especially strong at house-museums, turns museum employees into accidental, and sometimes irrational, advocates of a world that is either black or white.

I want to start talking about an episode of The Simpsons called “Lisa the iconoclast”. As part of Springfield’s bicentennial celebration, Lisa goes to the town’s history museum in order to write a report about Jebediah Springfield, the town founder. There she meets Hollis Hulbut, a renowned scholar and curator of the museum. Eventually, Lisa discovers that the local hero was really a fraud and a criminal. In the search for evidence, Lisa and Homer manage to publically dig up Jebediah’s corpse in search of a silver prosthetic tongue, the key evidence of the hero’s real past. When the coffin was opened, they find no tongue. However, Lisa is determined to find it and goes back to the museum. There she finds out that the curator had stolen the tongue in order to keep this unattractive part of history a secret.

Two years ago, while visiting Popayan, a small historic city in Colombia, I went with a friend to the Guillermo Leon Valencia Museum. This small national museum is devoted to the figure of a former president of the country, who, like all presidents of Colombia, has...
been disastrous, to say the least. Valencia’s scarce legacy can be summarized in a well-known anecdote: In 1964, General Charles de Gaulle visited Bogota to strengthen the relationship between France and Colombia. In a public toast of celebration, Valencia’s colophon to a laudatory speech to the glory of France was “Viva España”.

In the museum there were a couple of pictures about the visit of de Gaulle, and as soon as we saw them, we immediately asked our host, the museum education coordinator, about the *Viva España* anecdote. His reply left us speechless. He said: “The thing is….that Valencia was very tired that day and he got confused, it was not his fault”.

While the ethical connotations in The Simpsons’ example are clear, in the second case they might be taken as a funny or candid incident, with no ethical implications at all, just a matter of tuning up the interpretation skills of the museum staff. It may seem as a small problem, or as a matter of choice or focus. In fact, when talking about ethics, it could be argued that it is almost impossible, or pointless, to judge acts from the past from our present day ethics, and thus, some reprehensible behaviours (seen as such with modern eyes) are not even worth mentioning.

However, I believe it is precisely where the seed of bigger problems is rooted. If we think of museums as places that foster debate and critical thinking, we have to challenge accepted preconceptions, rather than being places that legitimate negative, but accepted, values and behaviours. As Stephen Weil put it, “museums are safe places for unsure ideas”, and so, if we want social justice to be at the hearth of the impact of museums, we have to abandon our Manichean way of thinking in order to share with our visitors new ideas that transcend the good or bad dichotomy and allow us to discuss (using the past as an excuse) complex contemporary issues.

At Bolivar House-Museum, a very small national museum located in Bogota, we have been aware of this problem and we have tried to tackle “uncomfortable” issues about an iconic
figure that for many visitors is such a hero that it is just unconceivable to say anything negative, or even human, about him. After all, Colombians are taught at school that Simon Bolivar was the ONE that free us from the Spanish yoke. Although this approach to a national hero may seem to have no implications for the present day Colombian, we believe it is fundamental for the historical moment that the country is living.

Two years ago we were preparing an exhibition about a rather questionable moment in Bolivar’s life. At one point in his military campaigns against the Spaniards he promulgated a decree called “Guerra a muerte” (War to the dead) ordering every American, or “Colombian” (Colombia, as we know it today, did not exist at the time) to kill every Spaniard (just for the fact of being such). We wanted to expose Colombia’s hero as a human being that was not perfect, and in fact took a lot of questionable decisions.

In the process of developing the exhibition we asked the public about what they would wanted to know regarding this delicate subject (using front-end evaluation and Kathleen McLean “prototype” models). And as it often happens, the public had the answer to our problem. One visitor wrote: “Regarding the ‘war to the dead’ decree, does Bolivar deserves to go to the International Criminal Court?”. This question, which may be taken as counterfactual history, conceptually nailed it. We decided to include his question in the
exhibition and gave the visitors the chance to vote. As expected, the majority of visitors voted for NO, but the interesting fact is that several voted for YES.

It means that even if the message of the exhibition was not everybody’s cup of tea, at least for some people, it made them reflect about Bolivar in a different way: “Maybe what we have been told about this Bolivar guy is not all the truth”, which may lead to “maybe what we know about history, politics or about anything has been manipulated by someone”, which in turn may lead to what seems to me as the most powerful message a contemporary museum is in capacity to share with its visitors: “do not believe everything the government, the school, the press, the media, the museum or anybody tell you. If you want to know the truth about anything it is in your hands to do it, get informed! Do not swallow whole”.

Voting post at Bolivar House Museum
But what does this have to do with big contemporary problems, let alone ethics?

Colombia is in a turning point of its history. After more than 50 years of internal war, peace is in the horizon. But peace requires that we, as a society, are able to discuss uncomfortable facts and feelings, and museums have to be in the hearth of that discussion. We cannot look the other way and expect peace to miraculously come. And peace is also usually taken as a Manichean concept: the complete lack of conflict, the antithesis of fight. That of course is unreal, and peace will only be achieved when we realize that conflict is ever-present and unavoidable, we just need to have the right tools to deal with it. And that is where museums become relevant in the construction of peace, by providing tools of cohabitation and coexistence. If museums do not do it no one will.

Nowadays there are several memory museum projects around the country, and in a couple of years the new National Memory Museum will open its doors in Bogota. This museum was created as part of laws of reparation with the victims of the internal conflict. As it always happens, in the Colombian museological world, the creation of this museum has generated some debate, as some museum professionals believe that it is unnecessary, others that it should have a different focus and it has obviously risen the dichotomy between history and memory.

Leaving these controversies aside, it is a decision already taken and the museum will be a reality. In my view, it is definitely better to have a new museum than to have none. The problem, to me, is not so much with the Memory Museum itself, but rather with all the other museums. The fact that there is a museum solely devoted to deal with the conflict means for many museums that they have been taken that burden of their backs. They biblically “wash their hands”. Many museums think in the lines of: “Thank God! There is someone in charge of dealing with uncomfortable subjects, let me alone in my comfort zone”.
That is by no means the attitude that will allow us to achieve peace. The big challenge for ALL Colombian museums is to deal with the conflict no matter what their typology is. You can talk about peace and post conflict from every possible angle: it has to do with natural history, with art, with history, with national heroes and a long, long etcetera.

And in order to do so, ALL Colombian museums must be able to connect their areas of research with the specific present of the country. Relativization of the past and the present becomes then a fundamental strategy to achieve this. Going back to the case of Bolivar’s House Museum, if we share the idea that the country’s heroes are not immaculate angels of God, then we open the door to re-interpret and re-thing contemporary figures that, for the time being, polarize Colombian society (a Manichean country, where you are defined by political opposites as either ultra-left-wing, hence sympathetic with guerrilla groups, or ultra-right-wing, hence sympathetic with paramilitary groups).

The Colombian conflict is incredibly complex, as there are not just two opposing sides: besides the civil innocent population caught in between the fire (the number of victims is estimated in 6 million people), the social stew is made of different guerrillas, paramilitary groups, the army, criminal bands, corrupt politicians, the police, drug lords and many other characters that have different interests in fighting each other.

So, what are museums going to say to the victims? What are they going to say to people that used to belong to criminal groups? What are they going to share with Colombians that were not directly involved in the conflict? It is definitely not a matter of just saying that there were bad and good people. It is obviously way more complex than that and unfortunately, we still do not have the answer to this conundrum.
However, I am sure that museums are key players in the post conflict process and we have to start looking for innovative ways to deal with our tumultuous contemporary history. But we cannot do it alone. We have to stop thinking that museums are islands isolated from day to day problems and from other museums. We have to start working together. We have to abandon anachronistic typological differences: No more contemporary art museums that have nothing to do with natural history ones. No more historical museums that feel uncomfortable with science centres. For the historical moment Colombia is living we need museums to encourage peace, and that has to start with museums being at peace with each other and even with themselves.

We need museums that do things by trial and error, that take risks, that make mistakes, that get involved. Museums that DO matter to society.

There is obviously a long way to go. But again, if we museums do not do it no one will.