International Seminar:
New Approaches in Interpreting and Representing
Slavery in Museums and Sites

Organized within the framework of
UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024)
UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (March 21, 2018)
UN International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade (March 25, 2018)
Frederick Douglass Bicentennial Commemoration (February 14, 2018)
70th Anniversary of UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2018)

March 19-22, 2018
Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

Concept Note

Over the last three decades, museums and sites of memory in Europe, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean have developed approaches to representing the slave trade, slavery and emancipation in their respective collections, exhibits, publications, promotional and educational materials and websites. Such sites which seek to preserve, commemorate and interpret the tangible and intangible natural and cultural heritage linked to this human tragedy include several types like interpretive historic sites, trails, routes (groups of related sites), waterways etc.

These representations of slavery in public commemorations, popular media and new digital multimedia resources are increasingly shaping the expectations and experiences of museum and site visitors, who are demanding more complete and updated portraits of people, places and objects that are connected to this painful past and to its legacies.

Beyond the various perspectives and means used in different regions of the world to tell this tragedy to the general public, developing the appropriate interpretation and media to address this sensitive issue is much more challenging than generally expected. Professionals working on these issues are confronted with complex questions:

- How are museums, sites and other educational institutions portraying the horrors of slavery and the feelings, thoughts, resistance, creativity and resilience of the enslaved people?
- How have museums and other heritage institutions chosen to tell this shared heritage in distinctive ways that resonate with their local, national and international audiences?
- What impacts did the trauma of the slave trade and slavery have on its victims and the perpetrators in the past and how do the psychological consequences of those traumas affect the climate of current social, political, economic and religious interactions in our society today?
- How are the dialectics between memory and history addressed?
How have the understandings of slavery changed over the past three decades and how does this inform the representation of the subjects in museums and sites today?

How do such representations vary from region to region?

What specific roles can the arts and humanities play in expressing and transmitting the memory of the slave trade, slavery and emancipation?

What opportunities do Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) and digital multimedia technology offer museums and sites to represent slavery in new and meaningful ways to capture this largely intangible heritage and augment the experiences of visitors?

How are museums and sites in different parts of the world employing new technologies to help relate the past to a range of visitors today and in particular to young people?

It is to respond to these questions that the UNESCO Slave Route Project: Resistance, Liberty, Heritage, in close collaboration with the U.S. National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (US/ICOMOS) and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, will organize an International Seminar on “New Approaches in Interpreting and Representing Slavery in Museums and Sites,” to be held March 19-22, 2018 at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA.

The main objectives of the conference are to:

- Assess the global impact of the slave trade and the legacies of slavery in the 21st century on health, education, political, economic and religious status;
- Exchange the experiences and best practices on interpreting and representing slavery from different regions of the world;
- Explore the roles of the arts and humanities and the new possibilities offered by ICTs/ digital multimedia technology to interpret and represent the memory and history related to the slave trade, slavery and their legacies;
- Define guidelines for the elaboration of a handbook on new approaches in interpreting and representing slavery in museums and sites;
- Explore opportunities and possibilities for partnerships among participants and with the UNESCO Slave Route Project.

The conference will bring together the following different participants:

- practitioners on the interpretation and representation of slavery from different regions of the world: museum curators, interpreters and managers of sites of memory; heritage professionals;
- Scholars working on these issues: historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, etc.
- ICTs/digital multimedia technology experts;
- leaders of civil society organizations;
- journalists and educators;
- the general public.