

The representation of war in museums – case Svensksund

War and conflict are sensitive subjects and therefore raise several moral questions which museum professionals are faced with. For instance curators at war museums can be expected to have the moral responsibility not to overlook the experiences of non-combatants in wartime. Jay Winter, who is an accomplished historian and a professor at Yale University, has written an article 'Museums and the representation of War (Museum studies, Vol 10, No 3 2012)' deals with these issues and I have used his article to further examine the representation of the Sea Battles of Svensksund.



The small Svensksund 1790 exhibit in the Maritime Centre Vellamo will be replaced with a much more comprehensive exhibition in 2020. Photo by Marcus Lepola.

The relationship of museums and morals

In this discussion, the definition of museum as a public forum is an important aspect, when representing the history of conflicts. In Winter's view, museums are important venues for posing difficult moral questions. Museums provide a site in which mixed populations can confront and mediate on sacred themes – sacrifice, death, mourning, evil, brotherhood, dignity and transcendence, regardless of faith or origin. According to Winter, museums have, in this respect, taken over some of the role of churches in current secular western society.

Alternate ways of conflict representation

Winter recognizes that museums of war often become war memorials, because the public may perceive the represented theme as sacred, often due to the lives lost at a given battle field. If the sacredness becomes too prolific, this can be a problem as it hampers down the possibilities of finding new approaches to the difficult issue at hand. An exhibit about war can easily become a mere display of weapons and display of combat – the “stuff for killing”. According to Winter it is the business of war museums to resist this temptation and offer a series of alternative ways of approaching the terror of the battlefield. It is possible to counter this by changing the gender balance of the exhibition and introducing women to the story. Women have been part of war since immemorial times and suffered greatly. There were many women whose husbands were killed in battle and a many also died because of diseases. In the case of Svensksund we also have knowledge of several women who took part in the actual battle of 1790 which provides an interesting angle to the storyline. Hence, museums of war are about real events, which they can never adequately describe. It is not because the designers are limited, but because the subject bursts through the limits of any conventional set of parameters set to control it. The impact of war is not limited to the battlefield but reaches everywhere.

Vellamo and The Battles of Svensksund

The Svensksund exhibition will be housed in the Maritime Centre Vellamo in Kotka. The centre is located at Kotka harbour, right at the battleground of Svensksund. Nowadays the battleground area is a protected, national memorial site of international importance. The Maritime Centre itself does indeed appear much like a church in the sense of idea, which Winter represented. It is a colossal building with a restaurant, auditorium, a library, offices and large spaces for exhibitions. The displays inside the Maritime Centre are produced by the staff of two different museums: The Maritime Museum of Finland and the Kymenlaakso museum. The first one is part of The National Museum and the latter is the provincial museum of Kymenlaakso area. The exhibition on Svensksund will be a joint-production of these two museums.



The Maritime Centre Vellamo in Kotka, Finland.

A shared space

Because the building is shared by two museums, the Maritime Centre displays a wide array of maritime and local history and cannot be considered a museum of war in the sense that Winter describes it. The proximity of the historic battleground however casts a long shadow on Vellamo as there are and has been publicly voiced expectations that the sea battles should be included in the Maritime Centre. As the planning work for the new display has begun, it has been decided to include the later defensive fortifications the Russians raised on the islands in Svensksund as part of the creation of a larger fortification system entrusted to General Alexander Suvorov.

Hidden narratives

There are many hidden historic narratives to address in the case of the Russo-Swedish war and the 1789 and 1790 Battles of Svensksund. One of such narrative is the fact that only a relatively small portion of the troops died as result of combat, the majority of soldiers succumbed to an epidemic called "relapsing fever". The disease began to spread among the Swedish fleet in the autumn of 1788 and devastated the forces. It has been calculated to have killed 10 000 people at the Naval Base of Karlskrona alone. The army and The Archipelago Fleet also lost the same amount of men to the disease. The death toll does not include the large amount of civilian casualties who were infected by soldiers returning to home for leave. Narratives of this type cannot be overlooked as they address the issue of war; suffering and the cost of life. Visitors have to be provided with a wide range of information as well as space for contemplation so that they are able to form their own opinion of the conflict and how it might relate to contemporary events.

Sources:

Merikeskus Vellamo: photo from Merikeskus Vellamo Facebook-page.