

“One Object, Three Visions. Virtual Museum of Integration”—An Experience in Participatory Museology

Aina Ferrero Horrach

[Aina Ferrero Horrach](#)

31/03/2022

Abstract

The Inca Museum of Footwear and Industry story is full of a sense of community that, despite it being born with the desire to pay tribute to the industrial history of its people, was inaugurated at a time of unrest and crisis in the sector of footwear following the closure of multiple factories. In recent years, the museum has undergone a major transformation process to build bridges with its hosting community and to acquire a leading role in its context with a new museography and a renovated annual program. The museum has been awarded the 2020 Ibermuseos Prize for Education for the project “One Object, Three Visions. Virtual Museum of Integration”, rooted in the framework of participatory museology. This project has continued the work previously set in motion to document the oral memory linked to the footwear industry, the revaluation of a traditional craft to promote a new resurgence and socioeconomic recovery in the municipality, the recognition of the cultural diversity of Inca to integrate it into the museum’s programming, and to promote intergenerational and intercultural dialogue so that new generations of researchers know their industrial past and can project it into the future.

The history of the museum

The Inca Shoe Museum story is full of a sense of community that, despite it being born with the desire to pay tribute to the industrial history of its people, was inaugurated at a time of unrest and crisis in the sector of footwear following the closure of multiple factories. Although the idea of opening a museum in Inca dedicated to footwear was a debated question and even wished for years, the reality is that, at the time of its inauguration in the year 2010 the museum was perceived as a kind of funeral monument “honoring” this declining industry rather than as a tribute to it. What the footwear industry really wanted at the time was to keep fighting with the support of public entities to prevent the closure of even more factories and the loss of thousands of jobs, and not a museum that remembers its glorious past.

The first years of the museum’s life were marked by staff instability and continuous changes in management. So, in 2017, when a new management team came in, a major public study was conducted in which an obvious disconnection between the museum and its community was detected. Therefore, one of the first goals set was to build bridges with the community by giving it a leading role in redefining its museum.

In this public study, which consisted of a pre-assessment part and a formative assessment part, [\(1\)](#) street surveys,

telephone surveys, a focus groups (participants visited the museum and then gave their opinion on how to improve it), and surveys of actual visitors were carried out. The study revealed several circumstances.

Initially, the museum remained unknown to most inquirers even seven years after its inauguration. Six out of ten respondents did not even know of the existence of the museum, located in an old military barracks, by the way, clearly visible within the urban plot of the 30,000 people city of Inca.

The study also noted the institution's shortcomings at a museographic and museological level. Now, there was an opportunity to give a voice to the people of the region so that they could decide, with the support of the museum's technical team and footwear specialists, how their story should be told. In very general terms, the town demanded more order in the museographic narrative, many more explanations of the exhibited objects, more photographs, more illustrations, more videos, more interactive resources, and more color. They asked for a friendlier museum showing their history, not a mere cemetery of machines. A great goal was also achieved—having the participation of AFACA, the Association of Footwear Manufacturers and Auxiliaries. It gave its support to the management team whenever the new conception of the museum showed the footwear industry not as a dead industry, but in the midst of a transformation struggle to adapt to the new market.

The news of the renovation of the museum spread like a wildfire throughout the town, and there were many signs of support and collaboration. The carpentry school of the Inca Town Council included in its plans for that year the manufacture of some of the new exhibition furniture, many new pieces were handed over to increase the museum's collection, and several companies of the region gave some economic and material donations.

Work was hard and intense. A tender was called to choose the museographic design firm that would undertake the difficult task of optimizing the economic and material resources that were already available to the museum. In fact, one of the premises of the tender was to reuse furniture as much as possible, transforming everything that was needed. Tatum & Golomb was the winning firm because they were able to overcome financial difficulties with a great dose of creativity and ingenuity.

On the other hand, the urgency of documenting the traditional knowledge linked to the production of footwear was understood. So, a great deal of work was set in motion to recover the oral memory of old shoemakers and people from industries auxiliary to footwear. Documentaries were filmed showing how to make the typical shoe of the area, called Goodyear, with the machinery in the museum's collection. This very documentary was used to make the illustrations that were to accompany the explanations of the machines and the room guides. A long-term project called "Footwear Stories" was started, in which former professionals in the sector were regularly interviewed to document their stories, culminating in a meeting presentation at the museum on the occasion of the "Piece of the Month."

During the production and design stage of the new permanent exhibition, the so-called "formative assessment" was carried out to test the prototypes of panels, posters and other elements to see the adequacy of their designs, the colors, the font size or the language on them.

After a year of work started at the end of 2017 with the aforementioned public study, on 30 November 2018 the Museum of Footwear reopened. It also assumed a name change (from being a Museum of Footwear and Leather to Museum of Footwear and Industry, with the idea of including more auxiliary companies). Amid great anticipation, the inauguration had the assistance of the main representatives of the footwear industry, the representation of the Inca society, professionals of museology and many collaborators, donors, and participants in the change of the museum.

That November 30, 2018, marked the beginning of a new stage for the museum. The museum wanted that the motto of working "from and for the community" to be the compass of its roadmap in order to achieve a community museum that would be participatory and would have a social vocation, following the postulates of industrial ecomuseums. It would be a mirror where the city of Inca would feel reflected, and at the same time it would serve to incentivize the local industry by promoting social and economic well-being.

The following years of work were determined by a desire to expand audiences. For starters, serving the children's

audience, proposing new resources and mediation spaces adapted to their needs.

At the end of 2020, the goal set was to respond to the social reality of the town and to involve more social groups in the dynamics of the museum. The socio-educational project “One Object, Three Visions. Virtual Museum of Integration” was set in motion. It would eventually be awarded the Ibermuseos Prize for Education, which is promoted by Ibermuseos, the Ibero-American General Secretariat, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AECID, and Cooperación Española.

The Ibermuseos Prize

On 30 June 2020 the Ibermuseos institution issued the call for the eleventh edition of the Ibermuseos Prize for Education, an initiative carried out annually since 2010 with the aim of strengthening the social function of museums through the promotion of educational programs and projects.

Specifically, the 2020 call was aimed at museums, community museums and community-based initiatives in the 22 Ibero-American countries that had seen their activities suspended or limited due to the covid-19 pandemic, and that presented an educational project to be executed either in whole or in part in a virtual medium.

In this edition, 210 projects from 16 different countries were presented. From all the initiatives in the competition, after two stages of evaluation by national commissions and the special evaluation commission, the 20 winning museums would be selected. They would receive \$2,500 each to help develop their submitted project. [\(2\)](#)

What the organizers were interested in rewarding were those proposals that valued heritage through education in order to achieve a more equitable, democratic and inclusive society: proposals that stimulated dialogue and collaboration with social, cultural and economic actors; community-based practices; sustainable practices in social, cultural, environmental and economic terms; those that gave prominence to children, young people and historically excluded groups; those that promoted gender equity and the role of women in the construction of social memory, and the inclusion of people with functional diversity. [\(3\)](#)

Therefore, the rules of the call by Ibermuseos were in full accordance with the objectives set by the Museum of Footwear and Industry, and so it was decided to participate in the award by presenting a project that would be suitable not only for the rules of the competition but for the objectives of the museum.

The project

Inca and the El Raiguer region have experienced a strong migratory process in recent years. This developed into a new demographic reality that sometimes led to some tensions between the native population and newcomers.

On the other hand, thanks to workshops and initiatives carried out previously in the museum, it had been possible to ascertain that new generations did not know the relevance of traditional trade for the region, nor that of the production of footwear, which has been one of the most characteristic hallmarks of the area.

This community-based project aimed to highlight the artisanal work of footwear production, so typical of the region, with the intention of connecting different social groups (the elderly, young people, and immigrants), highlighting the material and intangible heritage related to an endangered trade, encouraging the economic recovery and sustainability of the sector, and promoting sustainable and environmentally friendly consumer practices.

A factor that had a decisive weight in the type of project that was devised was the health situation of the time. The Inca Museum of Footwear, like many other museums around the world, was forced to close during the first half of 2020 due to the pandemic. At the time of its reopening on 1 June 2021 it did so by adapting its management and program to the difficult circumstances of what was so often called “the new normal.” Thus, the project not only

responded to the sociocultural context of Inca but did so from the perspective of current events marked by the covid-19.

The basis of the project, called “One Object, Three Visions. Virtual Museum of Integration,” was to create working groups of three people, precisely formed by one member of each of the social groups aforementioned—an elderly person linked to the footwear industry, a person not born in Inca, and a youngster. These groups would maintain conversations about an object or an immaterial process linked to the traditional footwear industry, generating a dialogue not only intergenerational but also intercultural.

This dialogue should be marked by the potential contrast between visions and knowledge and by this tri-directional learning provided by each of the different perspectives of the members of the work team, inspired, in the first place, by the object chosen by the senior member of each group. In this way, the premise of the project’s title would become effective—to project three different views on the same object.

These conversations would be telematic, with meetings that would be recorded, analyzed, archived, and made available to the world through the museum’s website.

At the same time, a documentary would be recorded—it would be released on the opening day of the temporary exhibition at the museum.

The goals

The project’s expectation was a threefold goal: to return prominence and therefore the sense of usefulness to the elders of the region; to reclaim the traditional craft of footwear production, contributing to a new resurgence and a new economic recovery, documenting the oral memory linked to the footwear industry; and recognizing the cultural diversity of Inca, integrating it as an essential part in the museum’s programming to be able to reach a society in transition and in motion, and furthermore helping people who arrived from other places know the history and heritage of the city, so that they can integrate it as their own.

Project development

1. Preparatory meetings

To carry out the project, the first step was to contact the main youth, elderly and immigrants’ associations in Inca. Moreover, there was a special collaboration with the mental health department of the regional hospital, which proposed as participants some of its former patients who had been engaged in the footwear industry. The museum staff would act as coordinators and observers of the process, documenting the project’s development and organizing.

Thus, the first group meetings were convened, segmented according to the three different types of participants. Meetings for the elderly and immigrants were held at the museum, and meetings for youngsters were held online. The purpose of these sessions was to explain the project to all participants, to provide a meeting point between them, and for them to share and discuss what might be interesting and what not for future three-way meetings.

The next step was to convene a physical meeting at the museum with all participants, so that, once the appropriate presentations were made, they would be the ones to choose with whom to form a group. This meeting also served as an opportunity for younger members of the project to install the Zoom app on the mobile phones of older participants or whoever needed it. The operation of the app was explained, and the appropriate tests were performed. In addition, learning how to use the Zoom app in the midst of a pandemic was beneficial on a personal level too, as it gave older people a new tool to remotely relate to their family members during confinement. That day was also used to agree on the times and dates for holding future three-way meetings.

2. Three-way meetings

After the joint meeting, eight groups of three people were formed. On 13 March 2021 the first three-way meeting was held—that is, made up of a former worker in the footwear industry, an immigrant and a young man or woman from the region. Over the next few weeks, the next three-way meetings were held. During these, conversations were generated about the object or objects chosen by the former industry worker. All meetings were recorded through the Zoom video conferencing application.

So, Mercedes, a seamstress and trade unionist, chose to tell Amadou from Senegal and Rayan, a young Moroccan, through an apron, a thimble and a series of press clippings about the strikes carried out by the footwear unions during the crisis of the sector and her memories linked to the footwear industry, so often intermingled between personal and professional experiences.

Àngel, on the other hand, used a pair of shoes made by himself to tell his experience as a shoe designer to Heliana, a Brazilian who is a shoe designer too, and to Ariann, who asked him a series of curious questions with the candor of a child.

Carmen, also a seamstress, recalled through a handmade iron and some leather shovels, with a mixture of humor and melancholy, how she came to the island at the age of 15 to work in the shoe factories. Rachida, from Morocco, felt very close to Carmen, and told her under Xavi's watchful eye, the young son of a local shoemakers' family, that she made artistic slippers in her country back when she was young.

The profession of leather cutters, one of the most difficult roles in the footwear manufacturing process, was passionately explained by Rafel. He informed other about the deep respect that shoemakers have for their precious raw material. Rafel, who proudly showed a large piece of leather to Paula and Carla, explained how each element of the shoe is made of a different part of the hide.

Tomeu, who was nostalgic for the past, enacted the vision of entrepreneurs on the rise and decline of the sector. Llorenç eagerly listened to his story, and Simona, from Romania, shared her perception of the footwear industry through the experiences of her mother-in-law, another shoemaker from Inca.

Maria Antònia's vision showed the lives of so many locals who were born in the middle of the 20th century—a life fully focused on work, on the sounds and smells of leather. Young Reyad, the son of Moroccans, curiously asked questions of a more personal nature, while Yaneth, from Mexico, listened intently.

Francisca, a former worker of a braiding firm, explained to Simona and her son Gorka, from Romania, the childhood of many boys and girls who had no option but to work in factories from an early age to help their family. It was the beginning of a job that, in her case and that of many other women, would become an important step for women's emancipation years later.

An industry with such an important development as the footwear industry led to the birth of many other ancillary industries and related professions. Mechanics were without a doubt one of the most necessary, as they took care of the machinery in the factories. Ricardo, who specialized in repairing hair braiding machines, explained the complexities of his job, while Yulay, from El Salvador, commented that the typical hide in her country was crocodile skin, and Aina, a young local girl, asked him about the working conditions back then. (4)

3. The temporary exhibition

Once the three-way meetings were over, the preparation for the temporary exhibition began with the active collaboration of all participants. Initially, all objects provided by the older members of each group would be inventoried—this would provide technical and detailed information about them. All conversations generated were transcribed to be documented and to facilitate the selection of the parts that should accompany the objects in the

video summary that would be projected through tablets next to each showcase. All participants were asked to describe in one word what did it mean for them to participate in this experience in order to be able to graphically express the meaning of the project, writing next to each object three different visions about it. Finally, a selection of photographs of the project's development was also made.

On 20 May 2021 the temporary exhibition was inaugurated, and the documentary released. This day was a significant date in the development of the project. All participants met and shared the most obvious materialization of the purpose of a participatory museum. Participants saw their photographs, their videos, their objects, their words, and their ideas literally displayed on the walls of the museum. It was a day full of celebration and recognition, a day for reunion and for projecting plans for the future.

4. The virtual exhibition

The virtual exhibition represented one of the central parts of the project. It was a matter of documenting not only the whole process but of safeguarding the oral memory and all the documentary information that had been generated during the conversations of the different groups. For this reason, a week after the opening of the temporary physical exhibition, the virtual exhibition that gives the project its name (“One Object, Three Visions. Virtual Museum of Integration”) would also be inaugurated on the museum's website. There, the conversations of the eight groups, the documentary, and the photographs of the whole project would be stored:

<https://museu.incaciutat.com/premi-ibermuseos/>.

5. The closing ceremony

On 18 November 2021, coinciding with the most important holiday in Inca, Dijous Bo (Good Thursday), the closing of the project took place. It was also the last day to visit the temporary exhibition, and an event recognizing all participants was held to deliver a diploma to each and every single one of them. This day saw the consolidation of the museum as an emotional meeting place for participants in a playful and relaxed atmosphere. Participants expressed their desire to carry on the project and offered to collaborate in future initiatives of the museum.

Conclusions

Objects have no memory of their own—it is the projection that each person makes on them that gives them meaning. The social idea of a participatory museum is the roadmap of the Inca Museum of Footwear and Industry and its the initiative “One Object, Three Visions. Virtual Museum of Integration.” By developing the project, participants, who at the same time have also taken on the role of educators, mediators and visitors to the museum, experienced an emotional relationship with the museological offer in their municipality.

This project recognized the demographic diversity of Inca, giving a broader dimension to the concept of participatory museum, including different social groups that are a reflection of today's society in Inca. The museum has become a neutral meeting place for the local community and the migrant community to share knowledge and experiences. With this project, seeds have been sown for starting a sustainable and lasting collaboration over time. The project wants to consolidate itself as a working tool for social inclusion, for recovering historical and traditional values, and for opening access to culture for an ever-widening sector of the population.

The work of generations of people who dedicated their lives to the footwear industry was pointed out. Their oral memory was documented and their usefulness in today's society as transmitters of knowledge and experience was recognized. The dialogue between all different groups involved allowed each one of them to contribute with their own knowledge, which was just as necessary to develop the project. In this way, participants felt useful, and at the same time enriched on a personal and collective level.

The innovation of this project has been based on the implementation of an intercultural and intergenerational methodological approach. In these times of a global pandemic, the usefulness of ICTs has become more evident

than ever. With ICTs, issues of social interest have been addressed, such as the crisis of traditional footwear manufacturing, the closure of many factories in the municipality, the need for economic recovery of the sector, and the intercultural integration of the Inca society for a civic and harmonious coexistence, which is not always easy to achieve. In addition, useful knowledge has been transferred for the personal life of all participants.

“It has been the best experience of my life,” said Rayan, 12. “I made new friends,” said Ariann, 9. On the other hand, Ricardo, a retiree, expressed the importance of recovering oral memory. Francisca, 60, expressed her joy for being able to participate. And Xavi, a youngster from Inca, pointed out that with this initiative he understood the need for today’s young people to be able to tell the young people of the future the history of their own town in order to keep on evolving.

Recognition, inclusion, and learning—three visions around the same experience that exemplify the feelings of the participants in this adventure. This marks the starting point from which to continue working in participatory museology.



Amadou, from Senegal, in front of a camera explaining his motivations for participating in the project



Whole group meeting where younger participants teach how the Zoom video conferencing application works



Francisca during a three-way meeting showing one of her objects



Mercedes, Amadou and Rayan posing in front of the exhibition space that collects their experience in the project



Rachida and her children, who never visited the museum until now, looking at a showcase of the permanent exhibition displaying a miniature representation of shoes typical of their country, Morocco



Notes

1. Pérez Santos, E. (2000). *Estudio de visitantes en museos. Metodología y aplicaciones*. Gijón. Ed. Trea.
2. Ibermuseos: <http://www.ibermuseos.org/su-museo-puede-ganar-el-11-premio-ibermuseos-de-educacion/> [Last visit: 2 February 2022].
3. Ibermuseos' call: <http://www.ibermuseos.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/edital-piem-2020-ibermuseos-es-final.pdf> [Last visit: 3 February 2022].
4. Ferrero Horrach, A.: Ripoll Planas, A. "Inca Museum of Footwear and Industry. 11 Ibermuseos d'Educació Award", at *Jornades d'Estudis Locals d'Inca*. Ajuntament d'Inca. 2021.

Copyright