

The Memory of the World Programme

The Memory of the World programme, launched in 1992 under the auspices of Unesco, operates in various areas of international cooperation with the intention of making the media and political leaders aware of the importance of documentary heritage. The initiative may therefore be viewed alongside the many conventions that exist to safeguard this aspect of heritage.

What are the key features of the programme?

► It covers a particularly wide field, namely documentary heritage in all its forms: engraved or painted stonework, parchment, manuscripts, printed works, newspapers, photographs, discs, films, computer programmes.

► It aims to be the Memory of the World, its mirror, protecting items rescued from extinction and drawing the attention of the authorities and general population to their fragility, their vulnerability and their importance.

► It is based in the Communication and Information Sector of Unesco. Thus as well as its role to protect, the programme also has a very clear role in promoting universal access to documents, especially through digital media.

► It is a programme and not a convention; a programme of experts and specialists entirely reliant on the good will and voluntary activity of its members. Participation in the programme is dependent upon the free involvement of governments and professionals. It does not come with any restrictions or require any financial contribution.

► Its objective is to draw attention to documentary heritage through encouraging enrolment onto the register of the Memory of the World which highlights the particularity and uniqueness of documents. Here are inscribed all those documents which have been identified by the International Advisory Committee (IAC), the responsible authority.

The way the programme operates is very simple: through an international advisory committee which meets every two years (in 2013 in Gwangju, Republic of Korea, from 18 to 21 May) supported by a secretariat based at Unesco. It



The Nebra Sky Disc, c. 1600BC ©State Museum of Prehistory, Halle, Germany, inscription 2013.

is implemented at a number of levels: international, regional and national.

The IAC is further assisted in its decision-making by sub-committees, including the sub-committee on the Register, made up of technical experts nominated in a personal capacity. It is at this level that I have participated over the last four years.

The work of the experts in the sub-committee, chosen from among librarians and archivists from all countries, is straightforward. Every two years the programme secretariat launches an appeal for candidates for the register. Normally the applications are presented by the national committees, limited to two for national nominations, but without restriction for international nominations. The guidelines for the work were established in agreement with IFLA or ICA. The committee must determine whether the application is in accordance with the criteria for inscription: the authenticity of the item of heritage presented (which is not always very easy to prove), its importance, uniqueness and irreplaceable

nature. The document must be representative of its period and of the place where it was created, must contain information which has a particular bearing on the country of origin, reflecting a significant aspect of the social, industrial, artistic or political development of the state in question and/or have an exceptional aesthetic, stylistic or linguistic value. Armed with these guidelines, the seven experts had, in 2010 and 2012, a dozen or so applications distributed to them by the secretariat out of the 80 or 90 received. First of all I must emphasise the conscientiousness with which I witnessed all the experts study these applications, which were particularly diverse and difficult to interpret. To have some idea of the documents submitted for our consideration I suggest that you consult *Memory of the World: The Treasures that Record our History from 1700 BC to the Present Day*, published by Unesco in 2012. It should be noted that by the end of 2012, 238 items of world documentary heritage were entered in the Register of the Memory of the World.

Some of the nominated documents deal with major historical themes. Records of the slave trade have featured prominently among them since the beginning. One of the best of the applications covering this subject seems to me to be that made in 2010 relating to the archives of the Dutch West India Company. The National Archives of the Netherlands, Brazil, Curaçao, the United Kingdom, Ghana and Guyana, together with the archives of Albany County, the state of New York and the municipal archives of New York, all collaborated in preparing the application. It was both comprehensive and interesting and accompanied by an international action plan to protect and promote the collection. In considering this application we detected a tangible desire on the part of all these archival institutions to make this segment of their collective history more widely known.

Not all the applications submitted are as comprehensive, and some are over-simplified, such as that presented by the archives of Geneva and Neuchâtel, seeking to inscribe the collections that they hold on Jean-Jacques Rousseau by presenting the philosopher of the Enlightenment as though he were just a French-speaking Swiss writer.

One of the problems generally encountered is the diversity of the proposals. Alongside a large archival collection, which has been to a greater or lesser extent listed, we might have to consider, for example, a music score, since the inclusion in 2001 of the manuscript of the symphony n° 9 by Ludwig van Beethoven.

One can detect trends in the proposals which are made to the programme secretariat, such as the submission of whole archival collections relating to the protection of Human Rights. France led the way in proposing, in 2003, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. One of the latest nominations was that presented in 2010-2012 by South Africa with the archives of CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa), the records of those conventions which led to the first multi-racial elections in 1994. There was evident interest contained within these documents, provided some tens of linear metres of records relating to the booking of hotel rooms, train or aeroplane tickets etc. were removed: in short, provided the necessary appraisal procedures were applied.



Top: Portrait of Hasekura Tsunenaga, 17th century, © Sendai City Museum, Japan, inscription 2013.
Bottom: Map of two docks on the Ahvaz Dam, Iran, 1889 © Centre for Documents and Diplomatic History, Iran, inscription 2013

I encountered one of these problems in the work that I was undertaking: the countries of South America and Africa, in particular, submit whole collections, such as Senegal in 1997, nominating all the archives of the AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française). Europe, by contrast, favours documents which have been carefully selected, such as Germany in 2010 with just 15 documents presenting the building and the fall of the Berlin Wall of 1962-1970. We need to find a balance between the two.

The programme celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2012 and now might be a good time to refine the criteria for inscription in the Register of the Memory of the World.



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