

# Women's museums today: their creation, objectives and contribution to history

Museos de las mujeres en la actualidad:  
creación, objetivos y aportación a la historia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the main women's museums existing worldwide, taking as its source the *International Association of Women's Museums*. It also explores the history of their creation and problematises their relationship with women's history and the concept of *gender museology*. It examines the principal vectors, missions and strategic lines of this category of museum and the structural themes of their respective permanent exhibitions, assessing the main approaches that have been identified for applying gender concepts to museum space.

**Keywords:** Women's and gender museums. Gender museology. Women's and gender history. Memory. Feminism. Visibility of women.

## RESUMEN

En este artículo se hace el inventario de los principales museos de la mujer existentes en el mundo, teniendo como fuente principal la *International Association of Women's Museums*. Asimismo, se hace el historial de su creación y se problematiza su relación con la historia de las mujeres y con el concepto de *museología de género*. Se abordan igualmente los principales vectores, misiones y líneas estratégicas de este tipo de museos y los ejes estructurantes de sus respectivas exposiciones permanentes.

**Palabras clave:** Museos de las mujeres y de género. Museología de género. Historia de las mujeres y del género. Memoria. Feminismo. Visibilidad de las mujeres.

## SUMMARY

1.—Introduction. 2.—Women's museums: origins, foundation and growth. Links to the concept of gender museology. 3.—The main structuring themes of women's museums. 4.—Conclusion. 5.—Bibliography references and Web sites.

### 1.—Introduction

In March 2015, 79 women's or gender museums were listed in the *International Association of Women's Museums*<sup>1</sup>, an organisation founded in 2008 in Alice Springs (Australia). 49 were national (state-run<sup>2</sup> and private) museums, 21 had been founded by feminist groups<sup>3</sup> and 7 were virtual<sup>4</sup> (table 1).

TABLE 1  
WOMEN'S AND GENDER MUSEUMS IN THE WORLD: NATIONAL  
(public and/or private), feminist-run, and virtual)

	<i>Museums</i>	<i>Feminist-run</i>	<i>Virtual</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
AMERICA	14	4	3	21	26.6
ASIA	10	2	1	13	16.5
EUROPE	19	12	5	36	45.6
AFRICA	3	3		6	7.6
AUSTRALIA	3			3	3.8
TOTAL	49	21	9	79	100

Source: <http://www.womeninmuseum.net/en/>. Consulted on 02/04/2015.

This represents a significant number of museum institutions distributed throughout the world, although the majority (almost half) are located in Europe,

1. The association began as an online platform, created in June 2008 at the time of the 1st International Women's Museums Congress in Merano (Italy). Its main objectives were: "to increase the visibility and acceptance of Women's Museums; to actively support each other; to make use of the internet platform in order to push ahead the work of network" (Womeninmuseum. The network of the women's museum: <http://www.womeninmuseum.net/en/>, consulted on 06/04/2015. For a historical analysis of this platform, see SCHONWEGER, Astrid: "Network Woman in Museum. Museos de las mujeres se conectan entre si". *Her & Mus, Heritage and Museography*, 3 (2010) 55-66. <http://www.trea.es/material/descargas/Her&Mus3.pdf>. Consulted on 30/03/2015.

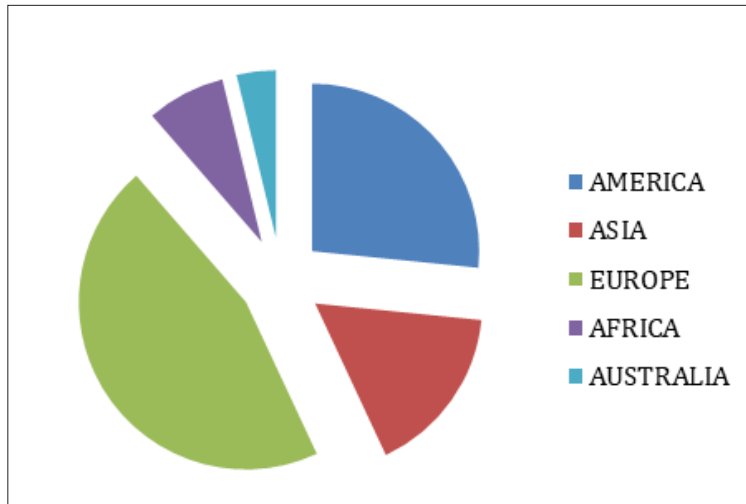
2. The expression is used to refer to public museums that are administered or financed by the government, and therefore obey the general rules of public services. Historically speaking, the foundation of state museums goes back, in the European context, to the 19th century, closely associated to the triumph of the liberal political system and to the claim of the nation states. About the concept of public museum see, amongst others, "Public" in DESVALLÉES, André and MAIRESSE, François: *Concepts clés de muséologie*. Paris, Armand Colin, 2010, pp. 74-75 ([http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/Key\\_Concepts\\_of\\_Museology/Museologie\\_Francais\\_BD.pdf](http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Key_Concepts_of_Museology/Museologie_Francais_BD.pdf). Consulted on 02/05/2017.

3. The expression feminist-run identifies museums that have militant, pedagogical and historical purposes on their origin, and are a result of feminist groups or movements.

4. SCHONWEGER, Astrid: *op. cit.*, pp. 55-66.

and the figure would be even higher if it included museums that are not affiliated to this association<sup>5</sup> (graph 1).

GRAPH 1  
WORLD MAP OF WOMEN'S OR GENDER MUSEUMS (BY CONTINENT)



Source: <http://www.womeninmuseum.net/en/>. Consulted on 02/04/2015.

However, they all share the same mission: to restore women's memories and heritage and provide visibility for the active involvement of women in the economic social, political and cultural life of their countries, both in the past and the present, with a view to overcoming gender-based discrimination and contributing towards a more just and democratic society. They also aim to value women's cultural and artistic expression and provide recognition for all women throughout time who have

5. According to Irene Vaquinhas, there were 71 of these museums in the world in 2013. The data was based on the museums included in the *International Association of Women's Museums (IAWM)* and those which appear on the site "Museos de la mujer. Patrimonio femenino", hosted by the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (VAQUINHAS, Irene: "Museos do feminino, museologia de género e o contributo da história". *MIDAS* [Online] [2014] 1-13. <http://midas.revues.org/603>; DOI: 10.4000/midas.603. Consulted on 06/07/2015. In fact, this platform also includes the following museums or house-museums which are not included in the IAWM list: in Spain: the Emilia Pardo Bazan house-museum; Rosalia de Castro house-museum; the "Mariana de Pineda" European Women's Centre; in Latin America: the Frida Kahlo museum; the Museum of Mexican Women Artists; in Germany: the Kathe Kollwitz Museum; the Das Varborgene Museum; in Sweden: the Anna Nordlander Museum. <http://www.mecd.gob.es/cultura-mecd/areas-cultura/museos/mc/ceres/catalogos/catalogostematicos/patrimoniofemenino/presentacion/enlaces-a-museos-de-mujeres.html>. Consulted on 02/04/2015.

played an active role in the creation of museum institutions, founded collections, or helped develop and organise museum resources.

Making women's initiatives in the field of museums and heritage visible is also understood as an act of justice, a means of reinforcing the political visibility of women<sup>6</sup> and a contribution towards constructing a society which applies the concepts of gender equality, social inclusion and participatory democracy<sup>7</sup>.

The mission of women's museums is therefore wide-ranging and cannot be restricted to preserving the (material and immaterial) heritage and passing on memories. They also have an important civic and interventionist role, both as spaces for reflection on gender issues including, in some cases, documentary and research centres, and also as "[...] an instrument for social change" and the democratisation of work practices<sup>8</sup>. With regard to the specific aspect of social change, the main aim is to identify the effort which some museums have made to develop strategies to demystify stereotypes, acknowledge diverse groups and/or identities, and promote policies for their representation which are more just and inclusive, amongst other work<sup>9</sup>.

On the basis of this central theme, the aim of this paper is to explore the following topics: the origins, foundation and growth of women's museums throughout the world and their links to the concept of gender museology; the main structural themes of the programmes of women's museums; their role in contemporary society and their future perspectives.

## 2.—*Women's museums: origins, foundation and growth. Links to the concept of gender museology*

The first official women's museum in the world was founded in the German city of Bonn by Marianne Pitzen in 1981, following the occupation of a building

6. VAHÉ, Isabelle: "Le 2<sup>e</sup> congrès des Musées de Femmes. Bonn, 9-11 septembre 2009". *Genre & Histoire*, 5 (2009) 3. <https://genrehistoire.revues.org/787>. Consulted on 30/03/2016.

7. RECHENA, Aida: "Teoria as representações sociais: uma ferramenta para a análise de exposições museológicas". *Cadernos de sociomuseologia*, 41 (2011) 211-244. <http://revistas.ulusofona.pt/index.php/cadernosociomuseologia/article/view/2651>. Consulted on 28/04/2013; VAQUINHAS, Irene: *op. cit.*, § 6.

8. TEJERO CONI, Graciela: "Museo de mujeres: un camino a recorrer en América latina". *Her & Mus, Heritage and Museography*, 3 (2010) 43-47. [www.trea.es/material/descargas/5-6.pdf](http://www.trea.es/material/descargas/5-6.pdf) her&mus, n.º 3, 2010. Consulted on 30/03/2015.

9. CASTELLANO, Cristina: "Musée de la femme? Hégémonies, frontières et alliances culturelles en muséographie contemporaine". *Journées d'études des doctorantes, Le Centre de Recherche en Études Féminines et de Genre*, CRESPPA-GTM, Université de Paris 8 Juin 2012. [https://www.academia.edu/1776644/Musée\\_de\\_la\\_femme\\_Hégémonies\\_frontières\\_et\\_alliances\\_culturelles\\_en\\_muséographie\\_contemporaine](https://www.academia.edu/1776644/Musée_de_la_femme_Hégémonies_frontières_et_alliances_culturelles_en_muséographie_contemporaine). Consulted on 29/04/2015.

by members of the German feminist movement<sup>10</sup>. Nowadays considered one of the main museums in Germany, it has housed a permanent exhibition since 2006 based on collections from the history museums of the former German Democratic and Federal Republics which, aft the fall of the Berlin Wall, could be combined, leading to a reinterpretation of German historiography<sup>11</sup>.

The boom in the founding of women's museums and/or museums dedicated to women's themes essentially took place in the 1990s<sup>12</sup>, when approximately two thirds of the current museums were created<sup>13</sup>. This process accelerated from 2010 onwards, particularly in terms of the creation of virtual museums or museums founded by feminist groups (table 2, graphs 2 and 3).

The foundation of these museums was preceded, in the 1970s and 80s, by the opening, within the European space, of some museums or museological nuclei, mostly ethnographic, and carrying exhibitions about the feminine condition.

The priority was to focus on the cultural characteristics of women from a particular region or to preserve women's traditions that were dying out or were in danger of disappearing. In their configurations, these museums shared some of the ideology that lay behind the ecomuseology movement in vogue at the time, particularly in terms of the importance attributed to territory, memories and heritage<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, it is mostly in the beginning of the 90s that, with the theoretical support of women studies and/or gender<sup>15</sup>, there is a decisive advance in the opening of women monographic museums.

In the United States of America, the founding of women's museums and, in particular, museums based in the former homes of leading female figures, began earlier and has intensified since the Second World War<sup>16</sup>.

10. SZPERLING, Cecilia: "Encuentro de museos de mujeres". *Clarín.com*, Lunes, 31 de Mayo 2010. [http://www.clarin.com/sociedad/Encuentro-museos-mujeres\\_0\\_271772890.html?print=1](http://www.clarin.com/sociedad/Encuentro-museos-mujeres_0_271772890.html?print=1). Consulted on 03/04/2013.

11. LÓPEZ BENITO, Victoria and LLONCH MOLINA, Nayra: "Una panorámica de los museos de mujeres en el mundo". *Her & Mus, Heritage and Museography*, 3 (2010) 12-13. [www.trea.es/material/descargas/5-6.pdf](http://www.trea.es/material/descargas/5-6.pdf) her&mus, n.º 3, 2010. Consulted on 30/03/2015.

12. MIRKIN, Dina Comisarenko: *Resignificando espacios: los museos de la mujer en México y Argentina* [PDF]. 2011. Resignificando espacios: los museos de la mujer en México y ... [www.museodemujeres.com/.../034\\_Resig...](http://www.museodemujeres.com/.../034_Resig...) - México. Consulted on 06/04/2013.

13. LÓPEZ BENITO, Victoria and LLONCH MOLINA, Nayra: *op. cit.*, p. 14.

14. MENDES, J. Amado: "Ecomuseus e museus de sociedade. Cultura e saber-fazer". *Museus e educação (Estudos: humanidades)*. Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2009, pp. 65-69.

15. LÓPEZ BENITO, Victoria and LLONCH MOLINA, Nayra: *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

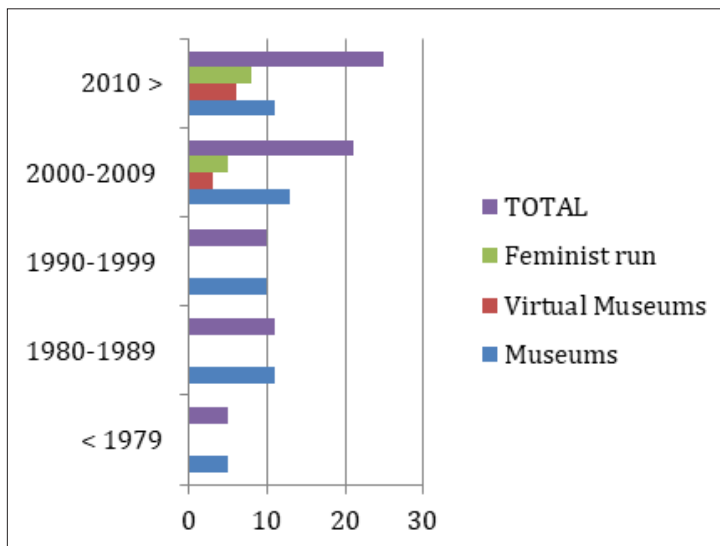
16. ARMITAGE, Susan: "Introduction" In DANILOV, Victor J. (ed.), *Women and museums. A comprehensive guide*. Oxford, Altamira Press, 2005, p. 8.

TABLE 2  
WOMEN'S MUSEUMS FOUNDED IN THE WORLD: BY DECADE

	<i>Museums</i>	<i>Virtual museums</i>	<i>Feminist-run</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>%</i>
< 1979	5			5	6.3
1980-1989	11			11	13.9
1990-1999	10			10	12.7
2000-2009	13	3	5	21	26.6
2010 >	11	6	8	25	31.6
No information	6		1	7	8.9
TOTAL	58	9	14	79	100

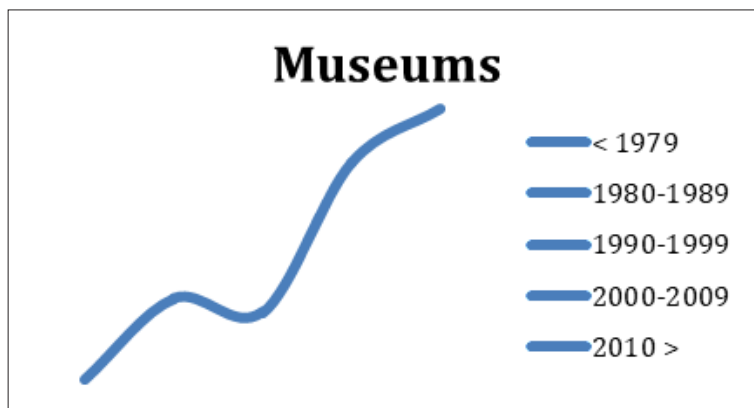
Source: <http://www.womeninmuseum.net/en/>. Consulted on 02/04/2015.

GRAPH 2  
WOMEN'S MUSEUMS FOUNDED: BY TYPE AND DECADE



Source: <http://www.womeninmuseum.net/en/>. Consulted on 02/04/2015.

GRAPH 3  
WOMEN'S MUSEUMS FOUNDED: OVERALL TREND, BY DECADE



Source: <http://www.womeninmuseum.net/en/>. Consulted on 02/04/2015.

One of the most recent museums, the Kvinnohistoriskt museum / Museum of Women's History, opened to the public in 2014 in the Swedish city of Umeå, which was the European Capital of Culture that year<sup>17</sup>. In general, the opening of this type of museum meets with resistance on the part of official institutions. In some cases, the period of time that elapses between the proposal to found the institution and its actual opening date can extend more than ten years, as was the case with, amongst others, the Women's Museum in Buenos Aires, Argentina which opened in 2006, seventeen years after it had first been proposed in 1989.

The rising number of women's museums from the 1990s onwards did not happen by chance. It was driven by the impetus given to (theoretical and empirical) women's and gender studies in various fields of knowledge<sup>18</sup>, and the emergence of

17. <http://www.kvinnohistoriskt.se>, consulted on 02/04/2015. The only museum dedicated exclusively to the history of gender is located in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv and opened in 2008 as a museum of the history of the feminist movement and gender: <http://www.grassrootsfeminism.net/cms/node/1194>, consulted on 10/04/2013.

18. "Gender describes socially accepted masculinity or femininity, as opposed to sex, which is the term used to denote biological and physiological differences between men and women". The concept of *gender* is more comprehensive than the word sex: in other words, the former is a cultural fact and the latter a biological one. In the 1990s, introducing the concept of gender into historiographical discourse had a significant effect on women's history, opening up new lines of research and forcing a reassessment of "the key questions in history", problematising the issue on the basis of the assumption that the difference between the sexes is not only a natural phenomenon but also a cultural and historical construct", VAQUINHAS, Irene: *As mulheres no mundo contemporâneo. História comparada*. Coimbra, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, 2005, pp. 20; 35.

the concept of gender museology<sup>19</sup>, which presupposes applying gender perspectives to present-day museology or, in other words, considering the female condition to be the structuring theme of permanent or temporary museum collections and museum-based activities. More specifically, gender museology also implies feminising the roles of museum directors and curators, which is considered essential for the implementation of policies conducive to good practice.

This new theoretical framework was the result of a combination of different factors, originating both in the specific field of museology and in women's and gender studies. In the case of the former, the emergence of the new museology may be cited, calling for a social and inclusive role for museums, values which emerged in the wake of the decisions published in the 1972 Santiago de Chile Declaration and the 1984 Declaration of Quebec. Both are founding texts which establish the integrated museum as operating "in the service of society" and link museums to new social functions<sup>20</sup>, as agents for communication and social intervention whose epicentre is the individual and the community, meaning that they are no longer viewed merely as storage spaces for collections and memories.

With regard to women's and gender studies, the impetus provided by feminist movements from the 1970s onwards should be highlighted amongst other factors, in the study of a collective past of ostracism and, in terms of history itself, the development of new areas of research resulting in part from a reaction against ignorance and unjust neglect, if not a systematically negative appraisal of the history of women<sup>21</sup>. The shift in the subjects of historical research, moving away from events of a political nature to those concerned with everyday private life<sup>22</sup> was another significant development, leading to the emergence of new problematics focusing on the social construction of sexual roles.

19. Gender studies are more wide-reaching than those specifically concerned with the history of women, and may focus on lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals or groups as well as members of communities marginalized for sexual practices that do not conform to social norms, PINTO, Renato: "Museus e diversidade sexual. Reflexões sobre mostras LGBT e *queer*". *Arqueologia Pública*, 5 (2012) 44-55. [http://www.nepam.unicamp.br/arqueologiapublica/artigos/artigo4\\_5.pdf](http://www.nepam.unicamp.br/arqueologiapublica/artigos/artigo4_5.pdf). Consulted on 02/05/2013; DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.20396/rap.v5i1\(5\).8635750](http://dx.doi.org/10.20396/rap.v5i1(5).8635750). This article is restricted to analyzing women's issues.

20. RODRIGUEZ, Andréia da Fonseca: *Gênero no espaço do Museu: uma leitura social da exposição "Entre rendas, chapéus e boas maneiras"*. Pelotas / RS, Museu Municipal Parque da Baronesa, Universidade Federal de Pelotas, 2010, p. 13. [museologiaufpel.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/andreia.pdf](http://museologiaufpel.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/andreia.pdf). Consulted on 13/03/2013.

21. VAQUINHAS, Irene: "Linhas de investigação para a história das mulheres nos séculos XIX e XX. Breve esboço". In *Nem Gatas Borrallheiras, Nem Bonecas de Luxo. As Mulheres Portuguesas Sob o Olhar da História (Séculos XIX-XX)*. Lisboa, Livros Horizonte, 2005, pp. 125-127.

22. VAQUINHAS, Irene: "Estudos sobre as mulheres a área de história". In *"Senhoras e mulheres" na sociedade portuguesa do século XIX*, 2nd edition. Lisboa, Edições Colibri, 2011, pp. 164-166.



Consequently, gender museology is the result of the convergence of these new areas of study and presents itself as a critical discourse on the social and political role of museums in contemporary society, primarily seeking —as already noted— to restore women's memories and heritage and provide visibility for the active involvement of women in all areas of life, both in the past and the present. However, it is a field of knowledge that been applied very little in practice and is under-theorised in terms of epistemological reflection, particularly in comparison with other academic fields in which women's and gender studies have developed significantly, such as anthropology, linguistics and literary studies or even history.

The creation of this type of museum has led to many theoretical and practical objections. In the case of the former, these concerns both the risk of imprisoning women in a fixed and unchanging biological profile oblivious to the social construction of gender and the effects of forces for change, and the identification of women's museums with feminism, thus masking the wide range of aims they could encompass. In the latter case, the objections are essentially based on the fear that founding women's museums may prevent the principles of gender museology from being applied to other types of museums<sup>23</sup>.

### 3.—*The main structuring themes of women's museums*

In terms of typology, most of the museums (approximately 60%, table 3) are dedicated to history and emphasise certain common approaches in their mission and strategies. Specifically, these involve contributing towards rewriting the history of their respective country, region or state by incorporating the gender dimension, and providing visibility for women's initiatives in various areas of social and cultural activity,

“Fighting against the forgotten” and “raising awareness of women's achievements and the role of women in society” are phrases frequently repeated in the mission statements of these museums, in which the common denominator and defining features involve recovering information and rewriting the narratives of the past, the specific nature of which is determined by particular geographical and historical contexts. These parameters determine the period covered by the museums, essentially the 19th and 20th centuries, since this is the key period of feminist

23. CASTELLANO, Cristina: “Genre et musées”. In CAILLET, Aline and GENIN, Christophe (dirs.): *Genre, sexe et égalité. Étude critique de nos rôles sociaux*, Actes du Colloque à côté du genre. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, pp. 124-130. [https://www.academia.edu/3530438/Genre\\_et\\_musées\\_Gender\\_and\\_Museums\\_Género\\_y\\_Museos](https://www.academia.edu/3530438/Genre_et_musées_Gender_and_Museums_Género_y_Museos). Consulted on 21/04/2015; LORRIAU, Aude: “Pourquoi nous n'avons pas de musée des femmes en France” (2015). <http://www.slate.fr/story/99029/pourquoi-musee-femmes-france>. Consulted on 21/04/2015.

TABLE 3  
 TYPOLOGY OF WOMEN'S AND GENDER MUSEUMS BY  
 MAIN AREAS OF ACTIVITY (figures in percentages)

History	31.6
History/rights and anti-discrimination	15.2
History and art	2.5
History and ethnography	8.9
History of famous women	1.3
Art	10.1
Rights and anti-discrimination	12.7
Ethnography	12.7
Famous women	5.1

Source: <http://www.womeninmuseum.net/en/>. Consulted on 02/04/2015.

activism, whether associated with women's rights movements or other types of collective action such as the abolitionist movements.

Various American museums are included in this typology, both from the United States and Canada, and Latin America. In the case of the former, the emphasis, at both national and local level, is on the conquest of social and political rights<sup>24</sup> and on pioneering women in various fields including aviation and aeronautics<sup>25</sup>, with a

24. There is also the "Women's Rights National Historical Park" in the United States of America, in Seneca Fall in the state of New York, a landmark in the history of women's emancipation. This was the place where the women's movement began in 1848 and where the first women's rights convention was held to discuss the question of women in the light of the US Declaration of Independence (1776). The Convention led to the "Declaration of Sentiments", which affirmed that "all men and women are created equal" and claimed for the female sex "immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which the male sex enjoys as citizens" (see ROSE, Vivien Ellen: "Le Parc Historique national des droits de la femme: où les 'droits' sont notre mission". *Museum International* 209, 53-1 (2001) 32-36; NASH, Mary: *As mulheres no mundo. História, desafios e movimentos*. Vila Nova de Gaia, Editora Ausência, 2005, pp. 79-84; <http://www.nps.gov/wori/index.htm>, consulted on 20/04/2013. Museums dedicated to this theme in the American continent tend to highlight women's contributions to the history of their respective countries or regions, whether this refers to the history of the USA or Peru, or the history of the state of Alabama or the region of Quebec, for example (See Alabama Women's Hall of Fame: <http://www.awhf.org/>, consulted on 06/04/2015; Museo Memoria de la Mujer Peruana: [http://www.peruyellow.com/company/57560/Museo\\_Memoria\\_de\\_la\\_Mujer\\_Peruana](http://www.peruyellow.com/company/57560/Museo_Memoria_de_la_Mujer_Peruana), consulted on 10/04/2013; <http://www.caretas.com.pe/1367/culturales/culturales.html>, consulted on 06/04/2015; [musedelafemme.qc.ca](http://musedelafemme.qc.ca), consulted on 07/04/2015).

25. Such as the International Women's Air & Space Museum, <http://iwasm.org/wp-blog/>, consulted on 22/04/2013.

particular focus on key moments in the feminist and women's suffrage movements<sup>26</sup>. They also include a specific category of museum which has its epicentre in the United States of America<sup>27</sup> but is now being replicated in other parts of the globe such as Australia and South Korea<sup>28</sup>, namely the "hall of fame" or, in other words, "walks celebrating famous women, in the style of the Hollywood Boulevard stars"<sup>29</sup>. They are designed to pay homage, in an educational way, to women who have contributed to the development of society in various fields, from politics to sports and including the arts and other areas.

The Latin American museums primarily value women's activism in support of independence movements in the 19th century, whilst in some Asian museums the central theme of the exhibition discourse is violence against women, whether in the form of foot binding in China (the Women's Culture Museum in Shaanxi), or by representing the victims of sexual violence in wartime (the Women's Active Museum of War and Peace in Tokyo, Japan, and the War and Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul, South Korea). Within this theme of denouncing wartime violence, some institutions within other museum categories have created memorials to women, including the Anglo-Boer War Museum in South Africa "dedicated to the women and children who suffered during the war"<sup>30</sup>.

A significant number of women's museums are associated with feminist movements/groups, both due to the ideology they convey and the fact that they are run by women, with their mission directed towards the fight against gender-based discrimination in contemporary society, even though they present the history of past situations<sup>31</sup>.

Without marginalizing these concerns, another aspect of these museums prioritises private and everyday life (work, family, domestic life, the body and birth, amongst other examples), including themes linked to the history of fashion

26. As an example, one of the first initiatives of the National Women's History Museum in Washington was to commission a monument for the Capitol rotunda commemorating women's right to vote, dedicated to three American suffragettes from the early 20th century. See BARD, Christine: "Les musées des femmes à l'étranger". *Bulletin Archives du Féminisme*, 3 (2002). [http://www.archivesdufeminisme.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=24](http://www.archivesdufeminisme.fr/article.php3?id_article=24). Consulted on 21/03/2013.

27. This category includes the following museums: the National Women's Hall of Fame, whose mission can be summed up by the phrase "Showcasing great women... Inspiring all!", the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame, the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame and the San Diego County Women's Hall of Fame.

28. Including the National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame (Australia), the Women's History Exhibition Hall (Seoul, Korea) and the Women's History Exhibition Hall (Sudan).

29. LÓPEZ BENITO, Victoria and LLONCH MOLINA, Nayra: *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

30. <http://www.wmbr.org.za/>, consulted on 12/04/2015.

31. The wide range of associations which are involved in creating women's museums or are planning to open them includes the "Museo de Hechos Y Derechos de las Mujeres" Association (Alicante, Spain).

and female ornaments. Based on history or history and ethnography, the women's museums in Denmark, Norway and Vietnam are examples of this category<sup>32</sup> or, in the specific case of fashion, the Museo delle Donne de Merano, which explores the evolution of the female condition over time via fashion<sup>33</sup>.

Close collaboration with historians is one of the keystones of some of these museums, and has an impact on the promotion of research projects, the organisation of exhibitions and the creation of virtual museums. Examples include the "Libertadoras" project, the result of a partnership between the Women's Museum in Argentina and the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin-American Studies at the University of Nottingham (United Kingdom)<sup>34</sup>, and the virtual exhibition "Patrimonio en femenino" ("Heritage from a female perspective"), organized by the Directorate-General for Fine Arts and Cultural Heritage in Spain, together with the Institute for Feminist Studies at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid<sup>35</sup>. The latter provides online catalogues of themed visits to the collections housed in two of the main museums in Madrid (the Museo Nacional del Prado and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia), organized under the heading of "women's itineraries"<sup>36</sup>. It is also worth noting the MUSEA virtual museum created in 2004 by the History and Information and Communications Technology departments at the University of Angers and the Virtual University in Pays de la Loire (France). By digitally reproducing works, objects and testimonies, combined with sound and video clips, it aims to show the contributions of women in various fields with a focus on the history of feminism. Although it is, in the words of one of its founders, "getting a little old"<sup>37</sup>, it is based, to a large extent, on the work developed by two history associations: Archives du féminisme, whose main priority

32. Such as The Southern Women's Museum, in Vietnam.

33. Museo delle donne (Merano-Italy) <http://www.meran.eu/cultura-tradizione/musei/museo-delle-donne/>, consulted on 17/04/2013; <http://www.museia.it>, consulted on 03/04/2015.

34. Museo de la Mujer (Argentina) [www.museodelamujer.org.ar/](http://www.museodelamujer.org.ar/), consulted on 10/04/2013.

35. Heritage from a female perspective: [http://www.mcu.es/novedades/2011/novedades\\_patrimonio\\_femenino.html](http://www.mcu.es/novedades/2011/novedades_patrimonio_femenino.html). To access the catalogues, see <http://www.mecd.gob.es/cultura-mecd/areas-cultura/museos/mc/ceres/catalogos/catalogos-tematicos/patrimoniodefemenino/ausenciassilencios/acceso-a-la-exposicion.html>, consulted on 27/04/2015.

36. The "women's itineraries" in the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid are dedicated to the following themes: "Authority and Power", "Science and Education", "Creation and Spectacle", "Work and Labour", "Rights and Equality": <http://www.museodelprado.es/educacion/educacion-propone/itinerarios/los-trabajos-de-las-mujeres>, consulted on 27/04/2015; <http://www.museodelprado.es/educacion/educacion-propone/itinerarios/las-mujeres-y-el-poder>, consulted on 27/04/2015; <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/visita/tipos-visita/visita-comentada/feminismo>, consulted on 27/04/2015. The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia also proposes a feminist reading of its collection, entitled "Feminism. A feminist perspective on the avant-garde" which, according to Cristina Castellano, "provides a new perspective on the national view of Spain" (CASTELLANO, Cristina: *op. cit.*, p. 129).

37. LORRIAUX, Aude: *op. cit.*

is to study and gather documents on feminist movements, and the MNÉMOSYNE association (Association pour le développement de l'histoire des femmes et du genre)<sup>38</sup>. It is not therefore surprising to find that renowned historians from the field of women's and gender studies are involved in the scientific committees of these types of museums, as is the case, for example, with Karen Offen, a teacher at Stanford University and a consultant for the International Museum of Women in San Francisco (USA), or Christine Bard and Nicole Pellegrin the founders and leaders of the *Musea* virtual museum<sup>39</sup>.

The main mission of the museums I have identified as “women's rights and anti-discrimination” museums is to contribute to, or provide a record of, recent initiatives, particularly those concerned with social responsibility involving the female sex. Dialogue between generations, ethnic or religious groups, the fight against sexual violence, including domestic violence, or the problematisation of relations between the sexes and institutions which exercise power are the driving forces behind these types of museums, which are closely linked to contemporary society. Representative examples include the International Museum of Women in San Francisco (USA), the Women's Museum in Istanbul (Turkey) and, in the case of domestic violence, the Gender Museum in Ukraine.

The art museums aim to display art produced by women, preserve their heritage within the visual arts and ensure they are exhibited. In this context, it is worth referring to an arts group—the Guerrilla Girls—founded by women who wear gorilla masks and use humour and art (posters, performances, etc.) to denounce, amongst other situations, exclusion and gender-based discrimination in the American art world, including museums<sup>40</sup>. According to the researcher Cristina Castellano, this has been an area which has developed slowly, given that in 2010 the percentage of women artists represented in museums in the United States only totalled 5%<sup>41</sup>.

Art museums are a category of museum which largely resorts to new multimedia technology and audiovisual language, not only as exhibition communication resources but also as symbolic tools. The dematerialisation created by audiovisuals also aims to serve as a metaphor for the remains and sources of women's

38. “Associations; Sites internet”, In *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 18 (2003) 266-267.

39. <http://www.mnemosyne.asso.fr/index.php?page=journee-d-etude-2013>. Consulted on 17/04/2013.

40. According to the site consulted, the Guerrilla Girls arts group was formed in the United States of America in reaction to an exhibition held in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1985 which aimed to feature the most significant artists in the contemporary art world. Only 13 (7.7%) of the 169 artists whose works were on display were female and they were all, without exception, Caucasian, [http://obviousmag.org/archives/2011/07/guerrilla\\_girls\\_gorilas\\_justiceiras\\_no\\_mundo\\_da\\_arte\\_1.html#ixzz2RqdH0b3y](http://obviousmag.org/archives/2011/07/guerrilla_girls_gorilas_justiceiras_no_mundo_da_arte_1.html#ixzz2RqdH0b3y). Consulted on 27/04/2015. See also *The Guerrilla Girls' Art Museum Activity Book*, Printed Matter, Inc., 2012.

41. CASTELLANO, Cristina: *op. cit.*, p. 117.

history, which are always tenuous and difficult to recover, whilst the juxtaposition of contemporary works of art with others from earlier periods aims to signify that the stories being narrated do not belong exclusively to the past but can also be combined with the present<sup>42</sup>.

Moreover, symbolism and metaphor in general have a special place in women's museums, whether in terms of exhibition discourse or the actual buildings, which are often renovated premises such as prisons, asylums and convents associated, in a general sense, with unspeakable suffering. Settings are created which exploit the connection between places of incarceration, discipline and the control of women's bodies throughout history. Art museums also include museums based in the former homes of artists, one of the most famous examples being that of the painter Frida Kahlo in Mexico City<sup>43</sup>.

Temporary exhibitions that claim to be inspired by gender museology and/or feminist museography are not very common and usually tend to be found in women's or contemporary art museums. Since this subject is not the main focus of this paper, I do not intend to explore it in detail and a few brief observations will suffice<sup>44</sup>.

The concern with gender issues in museum exhibitions has gradually been addressed by contemporary museology, in particular social museology<sup>45</sup>. It requires a commitment on the part of museologists to engage with this issue and specifically, as Pollock suggests<sup>46</sup>, "the production of a *genderised* and inclusive exhibition discourse"<sup>47</sup>. In addition, its introduction into exhibitions or museum communications implies "the eradication of gender stereotypes in communication; an exhibition language that is appropriate for all sectors of society and considers the distinctions between men and women; exhibitions which are not neutral and general in character", amongst other suggestions for possible paths to be taken to integrate gender museology into temporary exhibitions<sup>48</sup>.

As a means of establishing female initiatives in museums, some authors also propose giving visibility to women artists, collectors, patrons, curators,

42. MIRKIN, Dina Comisarenco: *op. cit.*

43. La casa azul: el museo de Frida Kahlo, <http://www.museofridakahlo.org.mx/>, consulted on 22/04/2013.

44. This article does not address the grand exhibitions that were exclusively dedicated to feminine and/or feminist themes. These were issues that, because of their relevance and representativity, are worth an autonomous and specific study.

45. For some temporary exhibitions that have addressed this issue, see, amongst others, the *patrimonio en femenino* site.

46. POLLOCK, Griselda: *Virtual Feminist Museum. Time, space and archive*. London and New York, Routledge, 2007.

47. RECHENA, Aida: "Contributo para a visibilidade das mulheres em exposições museológicas". In PINHEIRO, Cristina Santos; EMONTS, Anne Martina; FRANCO, Maria da Glória; BEJA, Maria João (coords.): *Mulheres: feminino, plural*. Funchal, Nova Delphi, 2013, 377-378.

48. *Ibidem*.

museologists<sup>49</sup>, and female museum staff in general (assistants, administrators, specialists in restoration work, etc.)<sup>50</sup>, as well as volunteers who provide services in museums (guided tours, support for conferences, *ateliers* or workshops)<sup>51</sup>.

There are very few studies on the development of the role of technical staff in museums over time. According to the historian Aurélie Peyrin, it was through voluntary work that women first started working in American and French museums at the beginning of the 20th century. In her opinion, voluntary work can be included in Michelle Perrot's definition of "women's work", as an extension of the "natural duties of women", which were maternal and domestic<sup>52</sup>.

However, the history of female collectors has its roots in the distant past, dating back, at least in Iberian countries, to the 15th century. María Bolaños Atienza, reporting on the situation in Spain, describes the early female collector as a housewife and heiress acting out of a sense of family duty<sup>53</sup>. The founding of collections by women comes much later and is, above all, a phenomenon of the contemporary age (19th and 20th centuries)<sup>54</sup>. Collecting is part of the mindset of the middle classes, the cult of the home and comfort, significant aspects of the importance ascribed to private life in the 19th century<sup>55</sup>. Challenging the conventional idea of the man as collector and the woman as consumer, many

49. Another possibility would involve analysing women's participation in international museum managerial structures. See PORTES, Elisabeth and RAFFIN, Anne: "Les femmes à l'ICOM". *Museum. Les musées au féminin*, 171-3 (1991) 129-132.

50. According to Rosa María Arjona Cano, in 2011 women represented 66.4% of the entire staff of Spanish state-run museums (ARJONA CANO, Rosa María: "Las mujeres como personal de museos". In *Patrimonio en femenino*. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 2011, p. 83. <http://www.calameo.com/read/0000753353fdf029c796c>. Consulted on 28/04/2013.

51. PEYRIN, Aurélie: "Démocratiser les musées: une profession intellectuelle au féminin". *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 1-19 (2008) 65-85. [www.cairn.info/revue-travail-genre-et-societes-2008-1-page-65.htm](http://www.cairn.info/revue-travail-genre-et-societes-2008-1-page-65.htm); DOI: 10.3917/tgs.019.0065. Consulted on 28/04/2013. In Japan, a country with a considerable number of museums, volunteer museum staff in the 1990s was composed mainly of women: see MATSUSHITA, Tomoko: "Japon: les bénévoles du Musée Nationale des Sciences". *Museum. Les musées au féminin*, 171-3 (1991) 144.

52. PERROT, Michelle: "Qu'est-ce qu'un métier de femme?". *Le Mouvement Social*, 140 (1987) 3-8. This is a discourse with an underlying notion of attributing specific qualities to each sex, with gentleness, manual dexterity, patience and docility being ascribed to the female sex, defining the division of male and female occupations over time.

53. BOLAÑOS ATIENZA, María: "Las mujeres en los museos: entre museólogas y coleccionistas" In *Patrimonio en femenino*. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 2011, pp. 36-41. <http://www.mcu.es/museos/MC/PatrimonioFemenino/>. Consulted on 28/04/2013.

54. On the subject of collecting modern and contemporary art, in which, on an international level, there are some well-known examples of female collectors such as Peggy Guggenheim, see, amongst others, DUARTE, Adelaide: *Da coleção ao museu. O colecionismo privado de arte moderna e contemporânea em Portugal, na segunda metade do século xx*. Lisboa, Caleidoscópio Edição e Artes Gráficas S. A., 2016, pp. 71-74.

55. VAQUINHAS, Irene (2011): "Em torno dos objectos da vida privada". In MATTOSO,

authors have recently begun assessing female collectors and the material culture associated with women in new ways. Items made by hand<sup>56</sup>, the “hundreds of little things” so often mocked, whether for financial motives or simply for entertainment were, in many cases, the starting point for collections<sup>57</sup>. The notion of comfort at the time required accumulating items (the taste for bric-a-brac which some authors describe), including china, works of art, books or other objects, leading to the establishment of collections and authentic “domestic museums”<sup>58</sup> in which women appear to have played a greater role than was supposed.

Many other aspects could be explored<sup>59</sup>. However, from the point of view of gender museology, the aim is to recover the voice and work of women within museums, deconstruct discourses and convert them into themes for exhibitions in a way that ensures that the silencing of women does not continue.

#### 4.—Conclusion

*Go to your nearest museum and count the number of works signed by women...*  
The challenge posed by the Guerrilla Girls a few years ago is still relevant: as

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José (dir.); VAQUINHAS, Irene (coord.): *História da Vida Privada em Portugal, A Época Contemporânea*. Lisboa, Círculo de Leitores, pp. 454-464.

56. The personalisation of handmade items is one of the expressions of individuality and self-affirmation characteristic of the age of liberalism. It is also an expression of the “material culture of love”, since the artefacts are heavily invested with affective values and created for specific purposes.

57. EDWARDS, Clive: “Women’s home-crafted objects as collections of culture and comfort, 1750-1900”. In POTVIN, John and MYZELEV, Alla (eds.): *Material cultures 1740-1920. The meanings and pleasures of collecting*. Farnham - England / Burlington - USA, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008, p. 50.

58. CORBIN, Alain: “O segredo do indivíduo”. In ARIÈS, Philippe and DUBY, Georges (dirs.): *História da vida privada. Da Revolução à Grande Guerra*, vol. 4. Lisboa, Círculo de Leitores, 1990, pp. 496-501.

59. It is the case of female artistic patronage, a fully historically developed theme, in the last years. Many studies have showed the complexity of this problematic and its use as a vector of female political influence and of diplomatic and dynastic strategies, amongst other aspects. About this issue please consult, amongst others, MARTÍNEZ MARIN, Cruz María: “El mecenazgo artístico de Maria de Hungria em el contexto europeo”. In CABRERA ESPINOSA, Manuel and LÓPEZ CORDERO, Juan Antonio (dirs.): *VI Congreso Virtual sobre Historia de las mujeres (del 15 al 31 Octubre del 2014)*. Dialnet-ElMecenzagoArtísticoDeMariaDeHungriaEnElContextoEu-4947316.pdf. Consulted on 07/05/2017; GSCHWEND, Annemarie Jordan: “Mujeres mecenas de la Casa de Austria y la infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia”. In *El arte em la corte de los Archiducos Alberto de Austria e Isabel Clara Eugenia (1598-1633): um reino imaginado*. Madrid, Sociedad Estatal para la Conmemoración de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 1999, pp. 118-137; LEBEAUX, Melanie: “Le mécénat des femmes em France et em Bourgogne (xv<sup>e</sup>-xvi<sup>e</sup> siècles). Nouvelles perspectives”. *Les Cahiers de Framespa*, 7 (2011). URL: <http://framespa.revues.org/726>. Consulted on 07/05/2017.



the museologist María Bolaños Atienza notes, the relationship women have with museums is defined by absence<sup>60</sup>, above all in terms of exhibition discourse, even though there have been significant changes in relation to technical and professional staff.

Therefore, since museums are places dedicated to memory, it is important to introduce points of view which favour equality, so that they can also reflect female initiatives in the process of human development. The archetype for the great museums of western Europe (the British Museum, Louvre, Pergamon) that helped shape modern society reflects points of view which are, in the words of Marián López Fernández Cao, “profoundly androcentric”<sup>61</sup>.

As essential elements in the creation of forms of nationalism and colonialism<sup>62</sup>, displaying the spoils of conquests and the perspective of the *conquerors*, they imply a gender discourse that prizes masculinity and military roles, excluding women or associating them with private life and maternity. Based on Darwinist principles, the ideological discourse they convey presupposes hierarchies of races, nations and sexes<sup>63</sup>, which translate into narratives that marginalize women.

The introduction of the concept of gender into the vocabulary of feminisms in the 1960s would inspire a significant reformulation of the various human and social sciences. Questioning biological determinism also meant questioning the social construction of sexual differences and their consequences in terms of power sharing, political influence and differentiated access to economic resources, as well as their impact on the production of scientific and technological knowledge. During the 1980s-1990s, the concept of gender as a *social construct* entered into the language of museology and had a positive effect on the exhibition discourses of some museums, also enabling a new type of museum to emerge. This is part of the wider process of recovering female experience and has played an important role, not only in the general development of historical themes but also in creating a feminist awareness, contributing towards a broader understanding of inequality between the sexes.

As Cristina Castellano claims “When museums abandon dominant approaches, and develop their agency capacity, they become a point of intersection, a zone of contact and are transformed not only as repositories of the collections but also into

60. BOLAÑOS ATIENZA, María: *op. cit.*, 36-41.

61. LÓPEZ FERNÁNDEZ CAO, Marián: “Es necessari un museo de mujeres?” In *Patrimonio en femenino*. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 2011, p. 78. <http://www.mcu.es/museos/MC/PatrimonioFemenino/>. Consulted on 28/04/2013.

62. LÉVIN, Amy K. (ed.): “Introduction”. In *Gender, sexuality, and museums*. New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 1-2.

63. CAINE, Barbara and SLUGA, Glenda: *Género e historia. Mujeres en el cambio socio-cultural europeo, de 1780 a 1920*. Madrid, Narcea, 2000, pp. 111-122.

agents of social transformation”<sup>64</sup>. Nowadays, women’s and/or gender museums are opening up new ground, both in the specific field of historiography and in terms of raising issues, which help us to understand how women have shaped their lives and expressed (and continue to express) them in relation to social changes, as well as in the demystification of stereotypes and in the promotion of more plural, fairer and inclusive politics of gender representation.

Finally, to borrow Virginia Woolf’s famous phrase, it may be said that an intensive collective effort has been made to acquire *museums of their own*...

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64. CASTELLANO, Cristina (2012): “Musée de la femme?”, *op. cit.*

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