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Seeing Like the Red Cross: The Permanent Exhibition of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (Av. de la Paix 17, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland).

How we look at the world depends on where we stand or the lenses we wear. As David Kennedy noted some years ago, when 'public international lawyers look out the window we see a world of nation-states and worry about war' (2006, p. 650; see also Mansouri & Quiroga-Villamarín forthcoming). How does the world look from the window of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement—perhaps the most emblematic of all humanitarian organisations concerned with war and its terrible effects? For some decades now, visitors to Geneva have been able to visit the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (IRCRCM) and wear those 'Red Cross lenses.' The museum's 2013 permanent exhibition, named 'the humanitarian adventure,' allows visitors to temporarily *see like* the Red Cross—with its blind spots and spotlights (IRCRCM 2023b). On my last visit in October 2023, I was informed that Museum officials are planning to renovate the exhibition after its decade-long tenure. With this in mind, my review provides a snapshot of the Museum's current exhibition, taking stock of how it offers 'spectators' the possibility to see and feel *with* and *about* this Institution and its mandate. In particular, I analyse how the exhibition frames the relevance of the IRCRC's operations for the protection of civilians and its 'universal' mission. I consider what 'protection' entails, 'who' provides it, and to 'whom' it is owed. While this review will never offer the reader the rich experience of visiting the exhibit in person—which has been considered a 'resounding success' in commercial terms in the secondary literature (Pinder 2018; Selimkhanov 2021)—I hope it might open vistas to a broader conversation about the intersections between the act of exhibiting, power, and the humanitarian imagination.[1]

The IRCRCM opened in 1988, after roughly a decade of internal negotiations within the Red Cross (Meurant 1988, p. 453). The driving force behind its establishment was Laurent Marti, a Swiss-born Red Cross official who started his career as a delegate in the Congo, Western Asia, Greece, Bangladesh, Cyprus, Lebanon and Chad throughout the sixties and seventies (Meurant 1988, 452). In 'the field,' Marti 'was impressed by the often-outstanding protection the Red Cross was able to afford victims in extremely difficult circumstances' (Meurant 1988, p. 452). And yet, upon returning to Switzerland, he was 'equally struck by most people's total ignorance

[1] In this sense, this review draws and expands from my previous work. See Quiroga Villamarín (2021; 2023a, and 2023b).

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of the institution's work in the field' (Meurant 1988, p. 452). For that reason, he established the museum with three main goals: to motivate visitors (particularly the young) to join the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement; to disseminate the institution's activities; and to stimulate financial contributions from governments and private parties (Meurant 1988, p. 454).

When it comes to civilian protection, the museum seeks to convert present passive museumgoers into future active humanitiaran agents, persuading them to make careers as 'protectors.' For example, one exhibit allows visitors to act *as if* they worked in the Red Cross' Central Tracing Agency during the Great War of 1914. In this highly interactive exhibition, museum-goers are given a series of index cards with details about prisoners of war, tasked with tracing their fate, and reporting back to their concerned families. In this way, the exhibition uses historical materials to impress upon present museumgoers the importance of their work for future humanitarian purposes. The exhibit showcases the plight of those who need protection—including relying on their testimony—to motivate patrons to join the Red Cross and/or fund the efforts of those who do so. In doing so, it invites viewers to become aware of the scale of the resources required for such operations, often overlooked both by narratives of war and humanitarianism, but central to both.

Figure 1: Traces of the past. © MICR photo Alain Germond.[2]

[2] I thank Kéré Architecture for their permission to reproduce this image (file 5_026) on 12 March 2024.

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Marti was keen on the establishment of a 'modern' or 'dynamic' museum, noting that the 'history of photography and cinema runs parallel in time to that of the Red Cross' (Meurant 1988, p. 455). The museum's first permanent exhibition employed 'state of the art technology' to offer spectators a plethora of visual elements—from footage from the Spanish-Unitedstatesean war of 1898 to contemporary satellite images from 'the field' (Kunkel 2021, 37).[3] This same principle was applied in 2013 when the current permanent exhibit opened, adding sound to render the visit an 'audiovisual experience.'[4] A distinctive trait of the exhibition is the use of 'smart' audio guides that automatically detect the visitor's location in the museum. Accordingly, one can move seamlessly through the humanitarian space, allowing the museumgoer not only to *see*, but also to *hear*, like the Red Cross.[5] This focus on audio was recently compounded by a museum playlist curated by the Montreux Jazz Artists Foundation (IRCRCM 2023a; Youtube n.d.). Like the permanent exhibition, the playlist is organised around three subsections: defending human dignity; restoring family links; and reducing natural risks. Each of subsection was designed by a different architect, all three having in common their non-European backgrounds.[6] The first one was entrusted to the Brazilian Gringo Cardia (dignity); while the family links section was designed by the Burkinabe-German Diébédo Francis Kéré. The Japanese architect Shigeru Ban was commissioned for the last partition (on natural risks). Ultimately, the Museum seeks to be a total work of art—or to use the German term, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Fischer-Licthe 2013)—in which architecture, audio, visuals, and interactive activities are combined to engage the visitor's senses and promote the Red Cross' mandate.

From the permanent exhibition, I focus on the first subsection on dignity, as it speaks most clearly to questions of civilian protection. It 'invit[es] us to reflect on the humanity and the principles that determine international humanitarian law.' The subsection seeks to portray the Red Cross's mandate as simultaneously universal and yet historically contingent. In the first chamber (dark and somber, illumnianted only by the glimmering white floating words), one is surrounded by excerpts of historical texts, drawn from 'all cultures,' that aim to highlight the

[3]Another renovation was done at the turn-of-the-millennium. For further details on this, see Mayou (2000).
[4] This is particularly clear in the 'reducing natural risks' subsection, in which the interactive game 'hurricane' (designed by the British Blast Theory group) dominates the exhibition. See Blast Theory (nd).
[5] Elsewhere, I explore elsewhere how this interpellates the expectator's senses with both visual and acoustic data (Quiroga Villamarín, 2023a &b).
[6] As I have argued elsewhere, this ought to be related to the institution's desire to portray itself as a truly international institution —a challenge given its deep roots in a local tradition of Swiss humanitarianism. See Quiroga Villamarín (2023a &b).

cross-cultural and transhistorical relevance of the Institution's humanitarian concerns. At the centre of this sombre room we can find the towering sculpture 'Dignity trampled underfoot': a massive white foot that stomps on the moving images (both literally and figuratively) of war victims. The interplay between the darkness of the room, the bright texts, and the menacing sculpture reminds visitors that the protection of civilians has been a timeless and truly universal project.

And yet, at the same time, the Museum also seeks to retell the particular history of its institution's mandate—for even if this concern was universal, its transmittal into international law and the emergence of the Red Cross as an institution also had a specific (European and rather Eurocentric) context (León Marín & Quiroga-Villamarín 2022, 27-50). Spectators are quickly introduced to a towering statute of Henry Dunant—sitting in his desk, writing his famous *A Memory of Solferino* (1862).[7] From then on, the museum's enduring allure lies in its promise to bridge the universal and the particular. It invites us to see the all-embracing mission that animates the Red Cross' peculiar agenda.

But the relationship is not without its complications—which the Museum reflexively seeks to grapple with. In my most recent trip, I saw an addition to Dunant's statue. In a new panel, an excerpt of Dunant's *Memory* chastised the 'weak and ignorant' women who tended to the survivors of the battle of Solferino. Drawing, I suspect, from the 2022 special exhibition 'Who Cares? Gender and Humanitarian Action,' similar panels interrogating the relationship between fixed gender roles and the Red Cross' humanitarian experience have now been integrated into the permanent exhibition (IRCRCM 2023c). I found this to be a timely and promising self-critical reflection on the limitations and blind spots of the Red Cross' line of sight. It reminds the spectator that even if humanitarian sentiments are universal, it is often 'particular' people (and until recently, mostly men) who decide 'who' gets protection. It shows that the Red Cross has grown increasingly concerned with the limits of traditional ways of seeing the world around it.

[7] Which, at least according to the traditional historiography, is seen as pivotal moment in the history of international humanitarian law. See Bugnion (2012), compare with Benvenisti & Lustig (2021).

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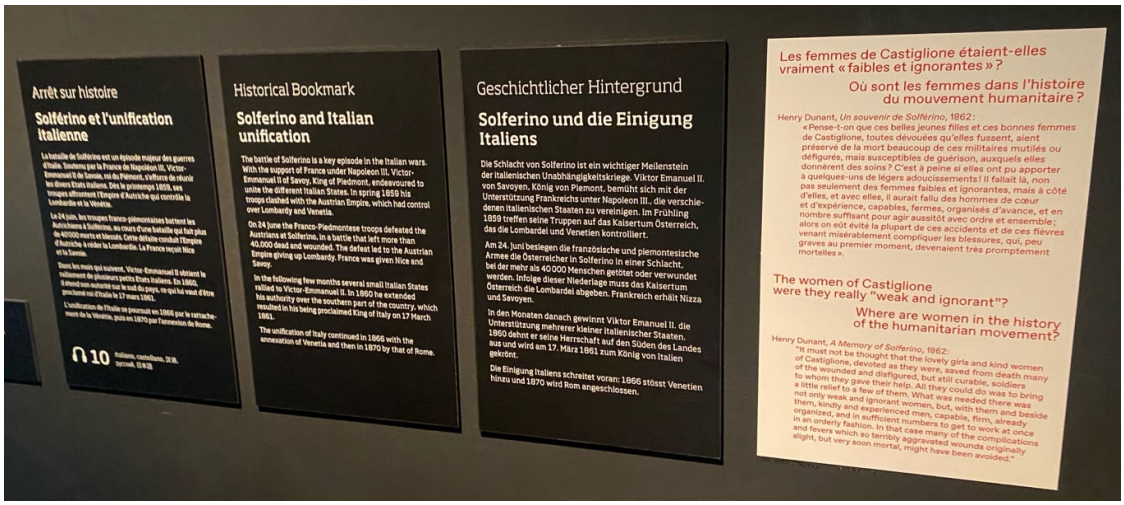

Figure 2: The contradictions of 'the men of 1862.' Daniel R. Quiroga-Villamarín (2023) ©.

A particularly moving collection, especially in relation to the question of protection, is the IRCRCM's exhibit of prisoners' objects (Mayou 2016). Deep within the 'human dignity' subsection, spectators are confronted with a selection of highly sophisticated objects, created by those detained in conflict-related conditions and that were gifted to Red Cross and Red Crescent delegates in their visits to those prisons. With a total of 360 items collected from 1914 to 2015, made 'from the rudimentary materials available to prisoners,' the objects bear witness to the imagination and creative force even of those who are targeted as 'enemies' or 'combatants' (Mayou 2016, p. 750).

As a Colombian, I was particularly moved by a glimmering red bird, made by the empty packages of a famous local coffee brand. The label accompanying the object clarifies that it was made 'by a prisoner who was a member of the FARC-EP guerrilla movement.' One can debate the morality or politics of the FARC-EP movement—indeed, this has been hotly discussed in recent years in Colombia in the framework of the peace process (2012-2016).[8] But the object invites us to look beyond 'particular' political strife and instead see the 'universal' appeal of the artwork. To see, in other words, with the lenses of 'neutrality' and 'impartiality', in which all of these detainees are subjects of 'protection'—whether as civilians or soldiers placed *hors de combat*. What is more, by highlighting the artistic capabilities of the detainees, the exhibition invites us to see beyond their role as 'warriors' or 'hostages.' In this presentation, the museum seems to proclaim through art that the Museum and the humanitarian adventure

[8] See, for an introduction, Ramírez-Gutiérrez & Quiroga-Villamarín (2022).

itself can be 'above' politics. Elsewhere, I've tried to show that is never the case (Quiroga-Villamarín 2023a & 2023b). And yet, I remain sympathetic to its promise to represent 'the rich imagination of a skilled hand while reminding us of the extremely cruelty of which we are capable' (Mayou 2016, p. 760). Even pirates—as enemies of humankind but 'human, all too human human' nonetheless—can be artists.

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