

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Politics and Poetics of Identity Formation in National Museums

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ABSTRACT

The role of national museums in shaping national, collective identities has been extensively studied. Scholars and practitioners have produced a wealth of literature that analyzes how national museums embody competing histories, disputed narratives, and cultural diversity through their structures, spatial organization, collection strategies, and exhibition policies. Museums are not neutral institutions. They are shaped by the values and interests of the people who create them. It is important to be critical of the messages that museums convey in order to shape the national identity. This article focuses on the representation of national culture and national identity in public museums by examining the politics and poetics of identity formation in relation to the historical development of national museums.

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INTRODUCTION

Museum studies is a broad field with many different perspectives. This paper will not delve into the political and historical concepts of museums, as this is a complex topic that could fill entire books. Instead, the article focused on the representation of national culture and national identity in national museums.

The role of national museums in the formation of national identity has been widely studied. Scholars and practitioners have produced a wealth of literature that analyzes how national museums represent competing histories, contested narratives, and cultural diversity through their structures, spatial organization, collection strategies, and exhibition policies. (Beier-de Haan, 2006; Bohman, 2000; Boswell & Evans, 1999; Braeburne, 2000; Crooke, 2001; Dean & Rider, 2005; Dodd, 1999; Fladmark, 2000; Hamlish, 1995; Hoffman, 1994; Holo, 1999; Kaplan, 2006). The creation of institutions that legitimize a nation, such as museums, flags, national anthems, parliaments, and national airlines, is essential for a nation to be recognized as a legitimate state both domestically and internationally (Anderson, 1991). This paper defines the term "national museum" by discussing the concept of a museum and examining the politics and poetics of identity formation in relation to the representation and conception of national identity.

Historical Development of the National Museum

The modern museum originated from the European cabinet of curiosity, which was a room or several rooms in a private house filled with objects of value or interest. These cabinets contained a wide variety of natural and man-made objects, both valuable and insignificant, and were not classified in any systematic way. The purpose of the cabinet was to "recreate the world in miniature" and to display the owner's taste, wealth, and experience. In the Baroque era, it was common for the son of a princely family to undertake a "grand tour" of Europe, during which they would visit the cabinets of curiosity of other wealthy individuals. The cabinet of curiosity eventually evolved into the modern museum, which is a more systematic and organized way of displaying objects. Museums still play an important role in stimulating curiosity and wonder about the world, and they also help us to remember and understand our past.

The European cabinet of curiosity was originally a private collection that was not open to the public. However, in the late 18th century, a number of factors led to the development of public museums. These factors included the rise of rationalism, democratization, and secularization, as well as the increasing sophistication of collectors. Some private collections became too large and expensive to maintain, while others were confiscated by governments during the French Revolution. As a result, many private collections were opened to the public, and the first public museums were born.

"One of the first public museums" (Bennett, 1995, p. 70) and possibly "the first national museum" (von Holst, 1967, p. 205) was the British Museum, founded in 1753 based on the purchased collection of Sir Hans Sloane. Public museums were originally expected to serve two contradictory purposes: to be a place for elite art appreciation and to be a tool for democratic education. The British Museum initially only allowed the public to visit in groups of 15 after they had presented their credentials and been vetted by trustees. This policy was opposed by the trustees and curators, who feared that the public would be unruly and disrespectful. This attitude changed after the success of the South Kensington Museum (later, the Victoria and Albert Museum), which opened in 1857 with a more accessible admissions policy. This museum was popular with the working classes, and their orderly behavior persuaded the British Museum to relax its own admission standards.

The public art museum evolved in the 18th century from princely art collections. In France, the Louvre palace was declared a museum during the Revolution. The princely collections were culled, amplified, and rearranged to generate a narrative about democracy and liberation. This process rearticulated the palace as a new, public, and democratic space.

One of the earliest examples of national art museums can be found in Vienna. The imperial collection of paintings was transferred from the Hofburg to the Upper Belvedere and opened to the public. This transformation of private collections into public ownership was an expression of the desire to shape the masses. Therefore, the development of the public museum is inextricably involved with political control.

The museum's formation ... cannot be adequately understood unless viewed in the light of a more general set of developments through which culture, in coming to be thought of as useful for governing, was fashioned as a vehicle for the exercise of new forms of power. (Bennett, p. 19)

In the 19th century, governments in Europe believed that they had a duty to improve the culture of their citizens. This belief was based on the idea that culture was a complex of manners, behaviors, beliefs, and morals, and that it could be improved through education and exposure to high culture. The government believed that it could exert social pressure through more subtle and less coercive means, such as providing access to high culture. High culture was thought to be an effective resource for improving behavior and morality, as it provided models of good conduct and values.

Museums were not the only cultural instruments used by governments to improve the moral fiber of their citizens. Other instruments included parks, libraries, concert halls, and schools. Museums were seen as particularly important because they could be used to counter the corrupting influence of taverns and gambling. Museums were also seen as a way to promote national unity and identity. However, 19th century social reformers knew that simply exposing people to high culture would not change their behavior overnight. Therefore, national museums also began to take on a role in protecting and preserving the national heritage. The exhibits in these museums were often arranged in a way that showed the progress of human civilization, with the present-day civilization being seen as the pinnacle of this progress.

In the 19th century, there was a belief that culture could be used to improve people. This belief led to a shift in the way that museums were perceived. Museums were no longer seen as exclusive spaces for the wealthy and educated. Instead, they were seen as public spaces that could be used to educate and improve the populace. This shift in perception was reflected in the way that museums were organized and displayed. Museums were no longer simply collections of objects. They were now seen as educational institutions that could teach people about the world around them. Visitors were encouraged to learn from the exhibits, rather than simply being passive observers.

The second change related to the mode of exhibition: Museums were no longer simply collections of objects. They were now organized in a systematic way, with the aim of educating and edifying visitors. This was done by grouping objects according to national schools and art-historical periods. A museum guide was often present to help visitors and explain the exhibits. This way, visitors could learn about the objects and the history of art. The goal was to educate the public and improve their understanding of art and culture.

The third change related to the regulation and observation of visitors: This was done in order to ensure that the desired changes in social conduct were taking place. This was done by placing restrictions on how visitors could behave in the museum. For example, visitors were not allowed to touch the exhibits or make noise. They were also expected to

follow the directions of the museum staff. The goal of this regulation was to create a space where visitors could learn and be edified without disrupting the other visitors or the exhibits.

The transformation of private collections into public museums was motivated by both democratic and political reasons. On the one hand, it was seen as a way to promote social reform and education. It was also seen as a way to maintain the distinction between the rulers and the ruled. The public art museum was seen as a way to represent the nation as a state, rather than as the king's realm. This implied that the state had replaced the king as the host and therefore redefined the visitor. The visitor was no longer seen as a subordinate of the king, but as a citizen of the state. The museum intended to persuade the general public into collusion with power by putting them on this side of a power which it represented as its own. This was done by giving the public access to the museum's collections and by presenting them as a source of knowledge and information. The museum was seen as a way to educate the public and to promote a shared sense of national identity. However, it was also seen as a way to maintain the power of the state by controlling the flow of information (Foucault, 1980). Hence, the modalities of power represented by public museums were not those of coercion and force, the messages behind private collections, but rather those of knowledge and information—the epistemological divide:

Through the institution of a division between the producers and consumers of knowledge—a division which assumes an architectural form in the relations between the hidden spaces of the museum, where knowledge was produced and organized in camera, and its public spaces, where knowledge was offered for passive consumption—the museum became a site where bodies, constantly under surveillance, were to be rendered docile. (Bennett, p. 89)

Museums are usually associated with collections of objects. However, museums are also concerned with the propagation of meaning. Meaning is not intrinsic to or inherent in an object. The meaning of an object is derived from the context in which it is displayed. The context includes the architectural frame, the selection and arrangement of the objects, the narrative that accompanies them, and the knowledge or assumptions brought to the interaction by the visiting observer.

In conclusion, the meaning of objects is not something that is fixed. It is something that is created by the people who interact with the objects. The context in which objects are displayed can play a significant role in determining the meaning of those objects.

Politics and Poetics of Museum Display

From its beginning, the museum's role in securing state power was well assumed: "In response to the ideological threat of the French Revolution, states throughout Europe quickly moved to establish their own national museums" (Duncan & Wallach, 1980, p. 457). Museums arrange exhibited objects in an intellectually justifiable ordered system to give an impression of their role in educating and civilizing the public. This arrangement makes museums seem like repositories of truth and their authority is widely taken for granted. Museums rarely draw attention to the assumptions that inform their choices of what to preserve or the principles that govern the organization of their exhibits. As a result, few visitors take the time to look beyond the museum's aura of omniscience. People merely inherit systemic legacies without examining their source or possible consequences.

The 19th century was a time of positivism, which is the belief that there is one immutable truth that can be

discovered through scientific endeavor. Public museums played a role in this process by enlightening the uneducated masses through carefully arranged exhibits. The museum's narratives also furnished the visitor with a sense of the dominant group's collective identity. For example, the visitor to the Imperial Gallery in the Belvedere saw a celebration of national and individual genius. The history of art was condensed into a few easily recognizable characteristics that could be used to shape a national identity. This process of simplification was seen as necessary to make the past understandable to a wide audience. However, it also had the effect of erasing the diversity of the past and promoting a single, universal truth. This truth was seen as the product of intellectual advancement, and it was the duty of public museum administrators to bring everyone up to its level.

The 20th century saw a decline in the belief in a single, universal truth. This was due to a number of factors, including the horrors of World War I. As a result, people began to see the world in a more diversified and less unitary way. This also led to a change in the way that museums were perceived. The uneducated populace was no longer seen as an undifferentiated mass, but as individuals who brought their own knowledge and experience to the museum. However, not all museums changed at the same time. Some museums continued to focus on the pedagogic impulse, which is the desire to educate visitors. Other museums began to explore more interpretive approaches, which allow visitors to create their own meaning from the objects on display. This has led to a more complex and challenging role for museum administrators, who must now be prepared to deal with a wide range of visitor reactions and interpretations. (Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Trofanenko, 2006). For example, various authors have analyzed the complexities of Britishness and determining the meaning of a national collection using the case of the Britain's Tate Gallery (e.g., Morris, 2003). As regards changes in curatorial style, the Tate's director, Nicholas Serota (2000) stated, "our aim must be to generate a condition in which visitors can experience a sense of discovery ... rather than find themselves on the conveyor belt of history" (p. 55). This aim evidently implies that the contested character of British art is no longer settled only by the curator as educator.

Museums try to give objects meaning by the way they organize them. However, the meaning of an object in a museum context may be different from the meaning it had before it was exhibited. This is because visitors bring their own knowledge, assumptions, and values to the museum. As a result, the meaning of an object can vary from person to person. For example, an object that is seen as a work of art by one person may be seen as a religious artifact by another person. The meaning of an object can also change over time. For example, an object that was once seen as a symbol of colonialism may now be seen as a symbol of resistance.

Museums are increasingly recognizing that visitors come to the museum with their own unique experiences and perspectives. This means that visitors do not simply passively receive information from the museum, but rather actively construct their own meaning from the objects on display. This shift in thinking is due in part to the influence of poststructuralist thought, which emphasizes the active role of the learner in the construction of knowledge. Poststructuralist thought also emphasizes the importance of context in the creation of meaning. This means that the meaning of an object will vary depending on the individual viewer's background, experiences, and expectations. As a result, museums are increasingly adopting more interactive and participatory exhibits that allow visitors to create their own meaning. They are also working to be more inclusive and representative of the diverse communities that they serve. In advocating a new type of institution, the post-museum, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) made the following suggestion:

Museums may be seen as cultural borderlands, where a range of practices are possible, a language of

possibilities is a potential, and where diverse groups and sub-groups, cultures and subcultures may push against and permeate the allegedly unproblematic and homogenous borders of dominant cultural practices. (p. 140)

The way that objects are displayed in a museum reflects the intentions of the curator and designer. The selection and placement of objects, the foregrounding of some and omission of others, together with the explanatory labels, wall texts, and brochures accompanying them (or lack of), all contribute to the meaning of the exhibition. This is called the poetics of museum display. The poetics of museum display can be analyzed to give an indication of how exhibitions create representations of culture. For example, the way that objects are grouped together can be used to create a narrative or to highlight certain themes. The use of labels and other text can also be used to shape the viewer's interpretation of the exhibition. However, the poetics of museum display is not always clear or straightforward. It is important to consider the intentions of the curator and designer, but it is also important to be aware of the unintended meanings that can be generated by museum displays.

Politics in the context of museums refers to the ways in which museums are involved in the production of social and political events. Museums are historical, social, and political events because they are shaped by the historical, social, and political context in which they are created. The narratives that are articulated through the museum's displays are shaped by the power relations that exist in society.

Museums have a long history of displaying objects that represent the superiority of a particular nation or group. This practice has been used to justify colonialism and other forms of oppression. However, museums are also places where people can engage with historical narratives and define their own identities. In recent years, there has been a growing movement to critically examine the role of museums and to challenge their imperial legacies. This movement has led to a new understanding of museums as cultural and political arenas where identity can be both asserted and contested. Some of the key issues that are being examined in museum studies include: The authenticity of objects and exhibitions; the exclusion of minority groups; the ethics of selling the past; the interpretation of history divorced from community or everyday experience. By analyzing exhibitions and collections in terms of their poetics and politics, we can better understand the ways in which museums shape our understanding of the world.

CONCLUSION

Museums take objects out of their original setting and time period, and attempt to convey new meanings to visitors. This process is inherently artificial, as it involves the curators and museum authorities imposing their own interpretation on the objects. When mounting an exhibition, curators have a definite goal and an ideal interpretation in mind. The objects in the exhibition are selected and displayed in a way that is intended to convey this interpretation to visitors.

This process can be seen as a delicate balancing act, as museums are charged with disseminating cultural values in a multicultural space. It is important for museum authorities to be aware of the power dynamics involved in this process, and to be open to dialogue with visitors. There is often a gap in epistemological authority between the creators of exhibitions and their subjects, and between museum professionals and visitors.

The more museum authorities understand what they are doing and why, the greater the possibilities for dialogue between all concerned parties—museum professionals and visitors, representers and represented. This dialogue can help to bridge the gap in epistemological authority and to create a more inclusive and equitable museum experience.

By analyzing the poetics and politics of museum display, we can better understand the ways in which museums shape our understanding of the world. Museums are not neutral institutions. They are shaped by the values and interests of the people who create them. It is important to be critical of the messages that museums convey. We should challenge museums to be more inclusive and to represent a diversity of perspectives.

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