

Museum Meanings

Series editors

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The museum has been constructed as a symbol in Western society since the Renaissance. This symbol is both complex and multi-layered, acting as a sign for domination and liberation, learning and leisure. As sites for exposition, through their collections, displays and buildings, museums mediate many of society's basic values. But these mediations are subject to contestation, and the museum can also be seen as a site for cultural politics. In post-colonial societies, museums have changed radically, reinventing themselves under pressure from many forces, which include new roles and functions for museums, economic rationalism and moves towards greater democratic access.

Museum Meanings analyses and explores the relationships between museums and their publics. 'Museums' are understood very broadly, to include art galleries, historic sites and historic houses. 'Relationships with publics' is also understood very broadly, including interactions with artefacts, exhibitions and architecture, which may be analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. These include material culture studies, mass communication and media studies, and learning theories and cultural studies. The analysis of the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from the museum as text, to studies grounded in the relationships of bodies and sites, identities and communities.

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London and New York

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Museums and communication: an introductory essay

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

The third international conference in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester was held in April 1993. One hundred and twenty delegates attended from Britain, Sweden, Canada, Malta, Holland, South Africa, America, Switzerland, Taiwan, Croatia, New Zealand, France, Finland, Denmark, Greece, Portugal, India, West Indies and Malaysia.

The first and second international conferences were held in 1987 and 1990, resulting in Pearce, S. (ed.) (1989) *Museum Studies in Material Culture*, Leicester University Press, and Kavanagh, G. (ed.) (1991) *Museum Languages - Objects and Texts* and *The Museums Profession - Internal and External Relations*, Leicester University Press.

The third international conference took museum communication as its theme. This volume, which resulted, brings together a varied group of papers written by museum and university professionals from Britain, South Africa, Canada, America, Croatia, India, Israel and Austria. Four papers have been specially commissioned for the volume.

The papers include approaches to both theory and practice, with practical case-studies, and many of them address issues that have not been addressed before in any detail, such as adult education and museums, and the role of museums in a new South Africa.

This chapter has four main purposes: first, to outline the framework for the conference and hence for this volume; second, to review some aspects of museum communication in Britain, particularly issues relating to the museum audience; third, to relate audience research in museums to audience research in other cultural fields; and finally to describe the structure of this book.

A framework for the conference

I began to plan the conference 'Museum: Media: Message' in 1990. At that time, it was beginning to seem as though a conference three years later devoted to issues of communication in museums and galleries would probably be pretty topical. In 1990 we were witnessing in Britain the decline of public funding for

the arts and museums, and were in the middle of a push by government to think of ourselves as an 'industry' with an economic role to play in social life, and with customers to satisfy. Marketing officers were being appointed in museums, and the concept of the 'audience' (all those people who might come to the museum) as opposed to merely the 'visitor' (those who did come to the museum) was beginning to take on considerable importance. It seemed reasonable to assume that the focus on audience would increase, and this has, indeed, proved to be the case.

Standards of management in general have come under scrutiny in both local and national museums, and standards of what has been called 'visitor satisfaction' (Office of Arts and Libraries 1991; National Audit Office 1993) and 'customer care' (Museums and Galleries Commission 1993) have been one important aspect of this. The Museums and Galleries Commission has issued guidelines on the quality of service for all visitors in museums (Museums and Galleries Commission 1993) and also guidelines specifically on provision for people with disabilities (Museums and Galleries Commission 1992). The Museums Association has established a working party whose work on equal opportunities in museums is well under way.

The assumption that attention to audiences would become of greater importance has been vindicated. From the chapters that follow, we will see how this has been reflected in practice in museums in Britain and in many other parts of the world.

It was more difficult to see in 1990 the severe recession that we have endured. Museums in Britain, and especially local authority museums, are now at a time of great crisis. Many museum people are losing their jobs, and many others are under threat. Nearly every local authority museum has been restructured, and some of the larger independent museums are on the verge of bankruptcy.

The reasons for this disruption are many, and it is not only museums that are suffering. Schools are losing teachers, and leisure facilities such as swimming pools are opening less frequently; many businesses have closed down, and very many people live in daily fear of losing their jobs. This context gives a particular poignancy to a book dealing with museums as communicators. It throws into high relief the past successes and failures of individual museums and galleries, and casts all our futures in a less than certain light. In my view, it tells us all too powerfully that if museums are not seen and felt to be part of the daily life of society, they will not survive.

Although survival is not automatically assured once social relevance is made clear, certainly without it closure is more than likely. The key to the development of well-understood social roles is the development of a better understanding of the tools with which we can work (collections, exhibitions, educational programmes) and the establishment and maintenance of qualitative relationships with audiences. Museums and galleries are fortunate in that there are many roles which they can play, there are many communicative methods to explore and many audiences with whom to work. For the future, development in all these areas will be vital.

This was the framework for the conference from which most of the chapters which follow were written; it is one of acute anxiety, but also one of immense opportunity. Change offers points for development and for new approaches. Survival demands this. Today museums must step forward to define for themselves a new future.

Museum communication in Britain

But what of the past? If the future for museums lies in the development of the communicative competence of the museum, what can the past offer us to help? I want to focus particularly here on what we know about museum audiences, because if we want to become better communicators we have to become very aware of our partners in the communication process.

What do we know about our audiences? I want to discuss this mainly in the British context, as this is the one I am most familiar with, but also because the nature of the field in Britain demonstrates some important points rather well. Let us consider audience studies in British museums.

Surveys of visitors to museums began in the 1960s. On the whole they were very small scale, and concentrated mainly on the demographic details of visitors such as age, sex, geographical location and so on. Mostly these small studies were carried out by museum staff, sometimes with the help of the local university or college. They were generally done with very limited resources, tended towards amateurism in methodology, and contented themselves with measuring a limited range of visitor characteristics. As public accountability increased, so the pace and the professionalism of visitor surveys has accelerated, with a particular urgency in the last eight years. It has been discovered that, with some exceptions, visitors to museums tend to be better educated and of a higher social class than the population in general. On the whole, it is the white population that sees museums as relevant, although specific exhibitions will attract specific audiences: in Leicester, for example, an exhibition of Afro-Caribbean history and art was visited by the Afro-Caribbean community, and exhibition called 'Vasna - an Indian village' was very popular with Leicester's large Asian population. This has taught us that museums attract the audiences they provide for.

Very few museum visitor studies looked at the museum visitor profile in the context of the profile of the local population, but gradually this too has become more frequent. Now, most museums know who their visitors are, how they reflect population patterns within a specific geographical area, how they relate to tourist movements and so on. Surveys in both local and national museums are carried out over time to monitor change and the effects of major policy shifts. Gathering basic data about visitors has become a necessary management tool.

During the 1980s a second type of analysis, which can be called participation studies, began. Government statistics such as Social Trends or Cultural Trends had already built up a small amount of not very helpful data on museum visitor patterns. During the 1980s, more specific studies commissioned by the tourist

organizations (English Tourist Board 1982), central government agencies (Myer-scough 1988) and some arts and museum bodies (Middleton 1990; Touche Ross 1989; RSGB 1991) began to look in more detail at what proportion of British adults visited museums, who they were, and, in outline, why they visited, generally looking at the last twelve (sometimes twenty-four) months. These studies were necessarily more broadly based than the museum visitor survey. They accelerated towards the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s.

Their conclusions are difficult to analyse as they variously report that 24 per cent, 33 per cent, 45 per cent and 56 per cent of the general population of Britain visit museums (Merriman 1991). Clearly we have to examine these data very carefully and ask questions about what definition of a museum has been used – whether, for example, this includes or excludes art galleries, or the built heritage. The time frame is also vital. The longer the time span, the greater the number of people who respond positively. In other words, if people are asked if they have visited a museum during the last two years, they are more likely to say yes than if they are asked about the last twelve months. The data suggest that a small proportion of people visit fairly frequently, but that a great many people visit rather irregularly over a longish period of time.

The most encouraging of these studies is one carried out for the Arts Council in 1991 (RSGB 1991) which used the time frame 'nowadays', which generally means 'in the last four weeks'. This showed that 48 per cent of the British population visited art galleries, museums and exhibitions, combined as a joint category, 'nowadays'. If 'nowadays' is a fairly short time span, and positive responses increase with longer time spans, a very large proportion of the British population is interested in museums and related institutions.

What do we know about what visitors do once they arrive in a museum or gallery? Research here is lamentably thin in Britain, although, under the title of evaluation, some work is beginning and some of the work that has been done is discussed in Part 3 of this volume. The pioneer in this area is, of course, the Natural History Museum in London.

The work that has been carried out at the Natural History Museum under the direction of Roger Miles is familiar to many. It is interesting that this work was carried out in a science museum, rather than in an art gallery. Science museums are often more aware of a specifically didactic purpose than other types of museum, and therefore have felt more strongly that they need to know what their visitors have learnt.

During the 1970s the Natural History Museum began to develop a series of new exhibitions. This was done as a very self-conscious process that was continuously monitored and documented. It was virtually unique at the time, although there was a glimmer of interest in exhibition theory at Liverpool Museum by the early 1980s, and further interesting evaluation work has been carried out there since.

Roger Miles and his colleagues concentrated on building an effective exhibition technology, using communication models from information technology-learning models from behaviourist psychology and sociological models from positivist

American mass communication theory (Miles and Tout 1979). The assumption of this research was that by perfecting the medium of communication (the exhibition), a successful transfer of messages would take place. It was assumed that if the exhibition was sufficiently expertly designed, visitors would automatically respond; in other words, that the medium itself was all-powerful and that the visitors were open to manipulation through its effects. Visitors were treated as a mass, a 'population'. After much trial and error and nearly two decades of work, it was admitted that this approach was not entirely successful, and that more attention needed to be paid to the visitors and to their reasons for being in the museum in the first place (Miles and Tout 1991).

Other research into museum visitors at this time was virtually non-existent. Exhibitions were designed for 'the general public'. In the education department, with face-to-face teaching for identifiable groups with specific learning needs, the attention to audience was much more sharply focused, but this approach was not perceived as relevant to any other aspect of museum work. Now in the early 1990s, and specifically after the research carried out by Paulette McManus (see Peirson Jones, this volume), we are becoming more aware of the importance of the social context of museum visits, and of the fact that museum visitors do not become new-born beings as they enter the museum. People come to museums carrying with them the rest of their lives, their own reasons for visiting and their specific prior experience.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s the introduction of marketing methods to museums coincided with the rise to power of younger staff who frequently held strong convictions that museums should be more open and more democratic. These two forces both focused on audiences and their needs, and this resulted in the opening up of the issue for the first time of what people felt about museums. The combination of marketing and the move to democratize museums led to a pioneering study in London of the attitudes towards museums of people who were not regular visitors. A mass communications research firm, Mass Observation, was commissioned to do the work by the London Museums Service (which is a London-based museum advisory body, part of the Area Museum Service for South Eastern England). Earlier demographic surveys which had identified the main characteristics of typical museum visitors were used to construct a picture of those who were unlikely to visit. Discussion groups were then formed with, for example, men over 60, Asian women, and women with pre-school children. Together with an experienced and appropriate moderator, perceptions of museums were explored. For the first time in Britain, market research techniques were applied in the museum context to build a picture of perceptions and attitudes (Trevelyan 1991). Further work was carried out of a similar nature in Croydon (MacDonald, this volume).

In museums in North America, this approach to the collection of qualitative data is one aspect of what is known as naturalistic evaluation (see Hein, this volume), but in Britain this is still very unfamiliar. Marketing methods in British museums have, therefore, established the value of regular research into demographic profiles of visitors, and research such as the London studies are demonstrating how valuable qualitative work can be.

A further concept from marketing is that of 'target groups'. We now no longer design exhibitions for 'the general public'. We understand that different sections of the audience have different expectations and approach the museum for different reasons. We consider the needs of children, families, tourists, the elderly, schools, and people with a range of disabilities. This is becoming almost routine. However, our concept of 'need' is still at a very primitive and underdeveloped stage.

We have just about got to the point in museums in Britain now where we are asking what we can do to behave in a more sensitive way towards our audiences. We are beginning to wonder what 'evaluation' is and whether it can help us to do our job better. Finding very little qualitative work with audiences in museums, we are beginning to look outside to see what other people are doing. In the National Museums of Scotland, for example, an assessment of visitor responses to their Discovery Room in the summer of 1990 was organized jointly with the Open University in Scotland, and video techniques generally used for evaluating lecturers were adapted (Stevenson and Bryden 1991).

If we do look outside museums for helpful methods, where should we go? We can argue that museums work with two distinct models of communication. On the one hand, we can use interpersonal, face-to-face communication, and we see this in action in inquiry services for example, where the curator and an inquirer meet each other directly. Other examples might be found in some aspects of the educational work of museums, where museum teachers work directly with groups. On the other hand, museums can also be categorized as mass communicators, as, in addition to dealing with some people face to face, they also deal with a great number of people in a less personal way.

Many exhibitions share the major characteristic of most forms of mass communication in that they involve a one-way process, a single message source with a large group of receivers, and the messages themselves are in the public domain. Museums, when they communicate through exhibitions, publications, advertisements and other methods such as videos, can be characterized as mass communication media.

So museums can be seen as both mass communicators and interpersonal communicators. This means that there is a broad range of methods in other fields that might be relevant. Clearly work in the educational field is useful, and many papers in Parts 2 and 3 of this volume discuss examples of relevant educational theory and practice. I want, therefore, to go on to try to make some sense out of the great body of material that can be found in mass communication studies, and in the related fields of media studies and cultural studies.

Audience research in non-museum fields

The mass media have been studied since the beginning of the century, mainly but not exclusively in America. By the 1990s we are at a point in Britain where there are great numbers of courses in communication studies and in media studies.

There are now many overviews of approaches to the subject (for example, Gurevitch *et al.* 1982; Curran and Gurevitch 1991; McQuail 1987; Heath and Bryant 1992) and many accounts of specific projects which examine topics ranging from the political effects to the gender-specific uses made of the mass media. Museums are rarely, if ever, to be found in these accounts. Early mass communication theorists assumed the media audience to be an undifferentiated mass, widely dispersed, lacking in both self-awareness and self-identity, and incapable of acting together to secure objectives (McQuail 1987: 31). The mass audience did not act for itself, it was acted upon.

Media at the beginning of the century included the press, radio, cinema and advertising. During the 1920s and 1930s there was a broad consensus that the mass media exercised a powerful and persuasive influence on audiences susceptible to manipulation. This 'magic bullet' or 'hypodermic needle' theory proposed that the media 'worked' on the passive public and that the effects of this could be measured through the use of scientific techniques (Curran *et al.* 1982). Studies of 'audience effects' proliferated.

During the 1950s and 1960s, following these 'effects' studies, it became clear that the audience was not in fact as passive as had originally been thought and that people in many ways made their own use of media messages. Rather than being manipulated by the media, people manipulated the media. It was found that people expose themselves to, understand and remember communications selectively according to prior dispositions. The manipulative and persuasive effects of the media were therefore likely to be negated by the interpretations of the 'active audience'. Studies of 'uses and gratifications' were carried out.

The late 1960s saw the development of cultural studies in Britain, and the decisive rejection of the simplistic communications model and consensual model of society that American mass communication theorists had used (Turner 1990; McGuigan 1992). British cultural studies employed Marxist models of society, and saw the mass media as a site for ideological reproduction in the maintenance of social, economic and cultural power relations. Ideological 'work' was studied through semiotic analyses of texts; first, the literary text, and then later, other cultural artefacts such as film or, rarely, exhibitions.

Semiotic analysis studies the implicit ideological messages of texts achieved through representation and mediation; how, for example, are women portrayed in Bond movies, in coffee advertisements or in social history exhibitions? The analysis of the text is carried out at a theoretical level by the theorist and rarely tested. Where empirical studies were done, it was frequently shown that the theorist's analysis was mere assumption, and was not borne out by audience responses. Ideology did not in fact 'interpellate the subject' (to use Althusser's words), 'preferred readings' (in the terminology of Stuart Hall 1982) were not achieved; in contrast, the audience was actively deconstructing the message according to a whole range of complex factors that left the media message with a role little short of that of setting the agenda for thought. Media messages (and much of this work has been done in relation to television) could not tell people how to think, but could set the agenda as to what to think about. This

in itself is not insignificant, but it swings the focus back again to the audience, away from the text. A focus on the text alone does not tell us how audiences use it.

In the new focus on audiences that is developing, both mass communication studies and cultural studies theorists are united in their interest in the development of ethnographic methods. The older 'uses and gratifications' studies have been rejected, criticized for remaining at the level of individual psychology and failing to take account of larger social divisions and structures that in large part shape individual psychologies and responses. Ethnographic audience studies have used and adapted methods from anthropological fieldwork, where the researcher works very closely with the people she is studying, and the research is carried out in an open and reflexive way.

Recent TV audience studies are particularly interesting. It has been shown that gender, race and class have specific structuring effects in the reception of TV messages. To take just one example, which I found especially fascinating: *The Cosby Show* is an American comedy soap, which concerns, uniquely, an upper-middle-class black family and their daily doings (Lewis 1991). Unlike other black American TV shows, it has, in America, a very broad audience of both black and white middle- and lower-class viewers. Detailed ethnographic audience research was carried out in America through home-based discussions with different types of people, using class and race as structuring categories. It emerged that different categories of people interpreted the programme according to their own aspirations and understanding of self and that they failed to see those aspects of the programme that did not support their own world view. The interpretations were personal, but also depended strongly on race and class.

Middle-class white viewers, for example, saw the upper-middle-class American life-style and failed to accord any importance to the fact that the family was black. The family was perceived as so 'normal', so much in line with the everyday middle-class American as seen on TV, that their blackness 'just sort of drifted out of' the minds of viewers (Lewis 1991: 174). Working-class black people, on the other hand, were very aware of the blackness of the actors and found the positive black images all-important. They celebrated the small references to black culture that middle-class whites had failed to see, such as the naming of the grandchildren as Nelson and Winnie. Other groups responded in other ways.

The show is constructed around ambiguity. The family is both black and, through their life-style, like whites. The show presents a view of blacks that is both radical, in that most American blacks do not live as they do, and everyday, in that many American soap families do. This ambiguity allows people with radically different political views and social perceptions to accept the programme as appropriate and to find it sufficiently undisturbing to enjoy it.

The analysis of *The Cosby Show* focused on the nature of the text (the TV message) and also analysed, using ethnographic methods, the ways in which several different audience categories used the message to create pleasure for themselves. The way forward for communication studies and cultural studies is

seen as the combination of textual and audience studies, with a sophisticated and complex model of both text and audience in place. This combination of models remains to be developed.

What can we in museums learn from this all too brief overview of audience studies in mass communication and cultural studies?

First, we can see that in terms of concept development, museums have not been in the forefront. Media studies in the 1950s proposed the active audience and the importance of social context in the reception of the message long before we had even begun to study our audiences in museums. Our methodology in museums has not paid attention to methods used by communication and cultural theorists, and an over-reliance on behaviourist, positivist methods has failed to reveal the importance of audience decoding. Up till now, we have had, in Britain, no ethnographic studies of museum visitors, and some of the chapters in this volume describe the new work in this field. We do need to begin to work in a more reflexive and more open way with audiences, to allow their descriptions of what museums mean to them to emerge during the research process.

A very important lesson from *The Cosby Show* example is the importance of the notion of polysemia, of plurality of meanings, that has been called in other contexts semiotic excess. *The Cosby Show* is carefully constructed to contain a range of meanings that are designed to appeal to the known different audience segments. The balance of appeal is carefully reviewed, in the knowledge that some people will see one thing and focus on one aspect, while others will pick up other messages. How much potential in museums is there for exactly this semiotic excess, this range of meanings, many of which will be invisible to many audiences, but which exist to be activated when someone with the experience to perceive and decode the message is present? I think the potential here is enormous and very exciting.

Mass communication research has thrown up other useful ideas, such as the rejection of the linear communications model in favour of a transactional model where messages are formulated, exchanged and interpreted in a continuous process.

We have, in Britain, learnt a great deal about audiences during the last decade. We know, for example, that we can to quite a large extent manipulate our audiences, by designing a product for a specific market. If we put on an exhibition about football, and market it appropriately, people who are interested in football will come to see it. We know also that people appear to respond very positively to the opportunity to handle objects and exhibits at discovery and interactive centres. At the National Museum of Scotland, for example, large numbers of people queue down the stairs and in front of the glass-cased exhibits in order to visit the Discovery Room.

What we do not really know is why people like to handle things, or why football (or other) memorabilia are important. Our learning has taken the form of trial and error. We observe large numbers of people queuing for the Discovery Room in Scotland and decide that we must have one too. The danger of learning in this

way is that we adopt the practices without understanding the principles. We go away and replicate the Scottish Discovery Room, and pretty soon there are little Scottish discovery rooms all over the place and everyone is bored to tears with them. Meanwhile the glass cases are still just as tedious as ever.

In order to develop truly we must look more deeply behind the successes and try to identify the principles of learning and of engagement that lie there. We need to know what the specific visitor finds meaningful, and we need to target individuals for our research according to specific structuring categories which include gender, race and class. Mass communications and cultural studies offer examples of work carried out in relation to other cultural fields. We can usefully learn from them.

The structure of the book

We live in dangerous times, times of constant change. Change is always different, and in museums we need to grasp and shape this difference to help us develop new ways of understanding our communicative potential. In order to do this we need to develop our knowledge, understanding and skills in several areas.

First, we need to work on the idea of the museum as a communicative medium. What does 'museums as media' mean? The chapters in the first part of the book go some way to address this issue, although the field is broad and deep, and the chapters presented here by no means exhaust what has become a very pressing area of professional study.

Museums are institutions based on objects. This is what makes them different from other social and cultural institutions. The first two chapters discuss approaches to the analysis of the object as a medium. Typically, in museums, objects are combined and presented to the public in exhibitions. Two chapters review the issues that this raises in terms of whom exhibitions are for, how they can be constructed, what models of good practice are available. How does the museum relate to external contemporary media? Two chapters examine this question, one in relation to nineteenth-century newspapers, and the other in response to the rapid development of new technologies today. Finally in this section, the moral role of the modern blockbuster art exhibition is questioned.

The second part of the book – 'Communication in action' – consists mainly of case-studies and examples of museums working with particular constituents. The first three chapters are more general: the first sets out the environment of the postmodern museum, describes some examples of the ways in which museums are responding to new demands and perceptions on the part of audiences and calls for the development of partnerships; the second chapter suggests guidelines for meaningful partnerships; and the third chapter outlines a management structure for achieving successful relationships with visitors within the context of a specific museum service. The following five chapters discuss specific examples of partnerships with a range of audiences in Britain and South Africa. The importance of knowing the audience, researching their specific interests,

attitudes and opinions, and the need to use this information in forward planning is demonstrated.

The third part of the book 'Evaluating the communication process', is concerned with theoretical approaches and specific case-studies of evaluation in museums and galleries. The first chapter presents a discussion of naturalistic or responsive evaluation based on the constructivist theory of education which is premised on the view that people construct their own realities. This is followed by two case-studies examining the relationship of schoolchildren and art galleries; the first explains the methods used to examine the museum/school interface, and the second discusses the meanings children made of paintings. The fourth chapter analyses the methods and findings of a comprehensive review of children's learning in a natural history gallery, and the fifth calls for the development of evaluative methods specific to historic sites. The sixth demands a review of the theory of adult education following some detailed research in Canadian museums and galleries. The final three chapters review aspects of gallery-based evaluation, including: a report of a detailed review of the response of visitors to a new British ethnographic gallery; an analysis of the frequency of use of a natural history museum in India by families; and a review of the range of gallery evaluation and visitor research that is carried out at a large London national museum.

Museum communication is a new and growing area. We are rapidly developing theory and practice in the communicative methods that may be used in museums and galleries, and in assessing the use and value of these methods. But more, much more, needs to be done. In many ways, museums are only just beginning to consider themselves in relation to their visitors. For most of this century, museum work has gone on despite rather than because of visitors.

This book is the first in a new series *Museums: New Visions/New Approaches*. This series will be taking up some of the issues that are raised when museums begin to think of themselves as a part of the communication processes of society. There is much to learn, and the series aims to produce material that will help in this learning. The first few books will develop the area of how language works in museums, what evaluation methods are appropriate in museums, and how market research can be used to develop the communicative potential of museums. It is hoped that this volume and the volumes that follow will play their part as museums reinvent themselves for the new century.

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Part 1

Museums as media