



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

(to be completed by marker)

Student Name: **MARGARET GALLAGHER**

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Student number:

1502249

ESSAY.

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- Are museums institutions of cultural and collective memory?
Discuss if this assumption would be correct or not. How did this idea change over time?

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I suspect that the majority of visitors to most museums these days (other than those devoted to the natural world) would generally see them as 'institutions of cultural and collective memory', whether they consist of collections, or buildings, or a combination of the two. Certainly, on the surface, this would appear to be the case, whether the collection is one created by an individual to showcase a much-loved collection of memorabilia, or a collection created over many years, by a large institution, containing art and/or artefacts from across the country and/or across the world - or, indeed, a 'collection' of buildings and their curated contents, whether across one site, or many (e.g. CADW / National Trust / English Heritage). We, as visitors, are presented with physical pieces of history, which are interpreted and contextualised by the curator/s and the museum, with what appears to be the simple agenda of education - the sharing of information; in essence so we can learn something about our country and culture's history or the history and culture of another country. In an ideal world, this would be the case, and oftentimes it is the main intention - but not always.

Even in the creation of museums there was an agenda and they had their own recognised and acceptable audience. Evolving from ancient centres of philosophy, education and contemplation (Lewis P1), whose denizens were entirely male and of the elite classes - to, certainly from the 17th century onwards, the display of the collections of individual enthusiasts and antiquarians, along with the results of plunder during the colonial era, where there was always an elite element to both the acquisition of and access to the resulting collections and museums - at least up until relatively recent times. Museums as we know them began to emerge from the 17th century (Lewis P2) onwards, but the desire to admire the unattainable and the enthusiasm to interpret the past and to learn about it were very much middle class pursuits. However in Victorian times, access to museums (among other cultural pursuits) was thought to be beneficial in fostering the elevation of the working class from their lives of bare survival and squalor and thus their engagement was to be encouraged (Bennett 1995:17).

Agendas, benign or otherwise, have not gone away since then, nor have practicalities, so when looking at what museums present to the general public, there usually is more than simply what is on the surface to consider as rationale, even in the case of a straightforward historical display. There are many questions that could be asked. For instance:

1. What is in the collection? Is it complete, representative, a group of random trophies or an integrated, contextualised gestalt. How did it get there? Was it donated, purchased, stolen, obtained by underhand means - or fake? Whose

is it? Is it resident, on loan or a travelling exhibition - and what are the consequent inherent limitations with respect to content, narrative and curation? In the real world no collection is going to be complete and no history is going to be known in perfect detail and context. With the best will and intention any museum must work with what it has, or has access to, along with what is known of the ongoing discovery about the history of the objects, and of their original and continuing form and function. This will limit the narrative both in scope and depth, but divulging those limitations will not be part of the narrative.

2. Why were certain things chosen for a collection or exhibition and what others may have been excluded/deemed unimportant - and why? Was it because it was of historic or other interest, perhaps belonged to an interesting person or culture, or very valuable? And whose history is it? Everyone's, or just one demographic, or class of society - and is that always the case? Whose history has been ignored - and was it deliberate - or was it because some people's histories are routinely ignored? Of course not every single aspect of everything can be included in all events, and the evidence of the history of the poor and disenfranchised tends to be ephemeral at best, but consistent exclusion without comment, or a whitewashed inclusion, are signs of an unspoken agenda, or attitude.

Alexander (1996:6) cites a heartfelt criticism of comprehensive exclusion by a black poet in Brooklyn, where she advocates destruction of a museum system that does not teach 'that nothing is more important than human life'.

3. What is being displayed vs what is not being displayed - and why? Many objects which are deemed boring, have limited provenance, don't fit in with the received narrative, or are not seen as important enough in the historical context, are left out - and this can present a skewed picture of the past. Also, exhibitions can be put together for a particular reason, to support a narrative, to make a corporate sponsor appear human, to increase revenue, or to showcase a selected international collection (or some of it..).

These and other considerations around curation can be a major issue, particularly in national flagship museums where local and international collections are held, and travelling exhibitions are showcased. Keeping up appearances, sticking to the current received historical narrative - and getting paying customers into the big exhibitions - are all vital to their image, reputation and finances. So, while the smallest, most insignificant piece of broken pottery can tell an entire and fascinating human story, if the will is there to let its story bring it back to life, this does not usually make for a good PR campaign and revenue-generating exhibition.

However a major event with a big PR campaign, built on an extravagant lie, and curated cynically, like the non-presence of Tutankhamun's actual mask in the British Museum's major exhibition in 2007 at the O2 (it was a hologram!) can also be counter-productive in the longer term, despite bringing in a lot of money. The fake mask, along with the general tackiness of the presentation, and cattle-like herding of the crowds (all of which I experienced personally), and which was also described in detail in the Guardian review at the time

(Jonathan Jones: 15.11.07), will have damaged the organisation's reputation with many people.

Interestingly, the Guardian review also drew a comparison with the Petrie and all its broken pottery, and how much better and effective the Petrie exhibition was. It just shows that a dismissive, elitist attitude towards paying customers can reduce the credibility of the organisation with the very people it wants through its doors. Not so much an exercise in sharing cultural and collective memory - more about making money from punters - both locals and tourists. That said, lack of sufficient funds can have a significant negative effect on the survival of an organisation, as it means there can be issues with being able to appropriately staff and manage a museum and to effectively care for the collection, as well as curate and display it (Ambrose & Paine 2006:5). Many small, local museums are having major financial issues right now as local authorities de-fund them across the country, thanks to the poor financial choices made in Westminster (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/01/closing-northern-museums-is-an-act-of-cultural-pillage>).

4. Cynicism and money-grubbing are not the only drivers, of course, and the list of who was, or is in control of, or involved in creating, extending and managing the collection - and who decides the focus or narrative of the exhibitions - can be many or few, depending on a number of variables - mostly relating to money and politics. Deciding what is important or unimportant, what is to be shared or ignored, shown or hidden - these are key in any exhibition and there are a number of possible pressure points in that decision-making process. The main influences on any statutory (many local museums) or charitable (the majority, usually for financial reasons) organisations are many, and include: 1.) the opinion, agenda and attitude of the overarching management (e.g. local authority or board of trustees); 2.) that of the operational management staff and curator, although often less influential than the trustees (who are their ultimate line managers); 3.) that of the funders (especially government or corporate, whose money always comes with conditions and/or expectations, even if it is just to create good public relations) and 4.) the audience for whom a particular exhibition may have been created. Trustees and funders, in particular, can be very powerful in ensuring a received and approved narrative is adhered to. The British Museum is a case in point with respect to having a similar idea of the received narrative, as their trustees are definitely not just a group of enthusiastic local volunteers, rather it is a selective group representing the queen, the government and the corporate world (i.e. the main funders):

The Board of Trustees comprises up to 25 members. One Trustee is appointed by Her Majesty, 15 are appointed by the Prime Minister and five appointed by the Trustees themselves. The remaining four Trustees are appointed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the nominations of the Presidents of:

- *the Royal Academy*
- *the British Academy*
- *the Society of Antiquaries of London*
- *the Royal Society*

From the British Museum website.

5. The collections in many national and local museums, and buildings-related 'collections', relate to the history of the location or country, and contain relics and/or reconstructions of the past, accompanied by a narrative of their origins: the heritage of the region - the story a nation or locality tells itself about its past. Depending on the evidence and its reach back into the past, this is often only partially complete or may be subject to dispute over differing interpretations of minimal material culture or unclear and incomplete written records. Also, the historic remains and objects and their associated narrative generally falls into a narrow category of the life and times of our ancestors: those relics, both monumental and personal, are generally those owned by, or created for the ruling classes or the church. They speak of conquest, empire, power, conflict, hierarchy and death, and the victor's narratives are often the main, or even the only ones deemed worth saving, or sharing. Anything beyond that, for the most part, will have been lost to the ravages of time. It takes a formidable and dedicated curator, and a relatively free hand, in order to research and present a deeper analysis of history - and to engage a community.

Cardigan Castle is an example of a local museum/site which is working towards becoming the historical focus for the town and locality - and not just of the site itself. But the fight for its rescue is salutary lesson in what can happen if the cultural and collective memory of a location has either been destroyed or allowed to fade away over a generation or two. As in so many other places, lack of interest, then the influence of money and greed, almost caused its destruction, which would have set Cardigan on the path towards slow decay and homogenisation, with no heart and a load of closed shops and businesses. It was a fight to get it back into public hands, when some people wanted it bulldozed and turned into a car park, the previous owner had let the place fall into ruin and become a dangerous eyesore, and even CADW (much to everyone's disgust) did not think it worth saving (Johnson 2002).

During the restoration process there were financial and CADW-imposed limitations that meant some things were reburied and others not even excavated. The whole site is a scheduled ancient monument and probably has the remains of 12th century buildings under it - perhaps even Lord Rhys' great hall, but there is no permission to look.

However, Cardigan now has a beautifully restored site, which showcases aspects of many eras, not just one. The castle and its surrounds have a long and complex history, right back to the neolithic, and as much as possible has been made evident and/or is presented in the curation of the site and the exhibitions. It is a lovely example of the evolving life of a site as it has elements of the earliest stone castle, the various iterations of the mansion first built in 1808, stone outbuildings and even a WW2 pillbox - and a thoroughly modern glass and slate-constructed restaurant (Johnson 2015). The history on display there, and many of the events held relate both to the castle and to the history of the town and its people, and there are plans for more in the future (<https://www.cardigancastle.com>). Added to this there are regular theatrical and musical events held in the grounds - just as Lord Rhys held the very first eisteddfod there in 1176.

We have come full circle, except the community owns it now (it is a registered charity whose trustees are local), not the aristocracy, or the man with the strongest army. Some things do change! And the community engagement process is not just about saving the culture, it is also about bringing people together to share experiences, and to help them to see their lives, and their families lives, in a wider context, linking the past to the future - and linking them to each other as well. And, at the same time, it is revitalising the town and the area - and connecting to people across the world whose ancestors once lived in the area.

6. There are also museums, oftentimes major national museums, particularly in those countries which had empires in the past, which also hold some of the important heritage, and oftentimes even the disrespected remains of the inhabitants along with their spiritual treasures, from those countries upon which they preyed. Sometimes this was said to be about saving the items from a resident culture that did not value them, but mostly it was because they could - and/or because they did not value the lives of those inhabitants. An interest in history and a large amount of money, along with the backing of an empire and its attitude of entitlement, led collectors to believe that they had the right to anything they wanted. And the narrative was one of colonialism. It is interesting to realise that, as a consequence of empire, when considering the entire history of these stolen or nefariously obtained items, rather than just their original provenance, their recent history and current circumstances have also become part of their life story, as well as the life story of the country holding them - a heritage of conquest and of plunder. But the narrative of this is rarely, if ever, part of the history shared with the public. Rather, an anthropological view is taken, as if these people, their deceased ancestors and their valued property are little more than scientific-style specimens. Which bears little resemblance to a true 'cultural and collective memory' - rather it is a sanitised and selective one, with an unspoken overlay of racist colonialism. So when considering the 'life and career' (Samuel & Alberti 2005:560) of material culture - for these items, the process of colonial theft is now very much part of their ongoing history. However this history is again evolving, as there is currently a concerted, ongoing, international effort aimed at repatriation, particularly for the personal and cultural items. UNESCO has brought together representatives from cultures all over the world, along with the colonial predators, with the aim of repatriation via agreed processes (http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco-liaison-office-in-new-york/about-this-office/single-view/news/international_repatriation_of_indigenous_cultural_heritage/).

The stated aim is to preserve and protect first nation cultures for future generations, and to do this they must have returned what was taken, and to restore what was deliberately destroyed, including language and spiritual practices. (Something that even Wales suffered.) This repatriation programme will again extend the objects' narratives towards what at least appears to be a more respectful attitude to the original owners, along with a return to the care, respect and true function for which they were originally created. And it will return the remains of the ancestors to their homeland,

where they belong and where their descendants can put them to rest with respect and care. Not in a museum, but back within their community. There are, of course, other issues with respect to monumental and historical material culture that is out of context - and contested. Money, pride, history, war and politics, along with the stated 'citizens of the world' aims of flagship museums like the British Museum, all come into play (Cuno 2008, 2009), but it is beyond the scope of this essay.

So what are we left with? Is our cultural and collective memory safe in the hands of museums? Certainly, museums and their collections have a long, complex and sometimes unpleasant history, while Foucault seems to think that museums are a moribund waste of time and space; an 'amusement park' only (Bennett 1995:1). I don't agree, even though, for some people, the amusement park metaphor may be the case; museums sometimes being just something to do on a rainy day. Because, while there are many influences: political, historical and financial, on what we are shown and told, museums are also places to spark wonder and imagination and they can engender the desire to think about life and people on a grander and more complex scale than that which our normal daily lives may provide. In a way, rather similar to the original ancient museum idea, with an overlay of the 'citizens of the world' philosophy. Museums can expand our field of view to the wider world, both at home and abroad, into the past as well as the present, helping us to understand ourselves and each other - and this is a good thing - but with the proviso that we open our eyes wider even than this, in order to contextualise the museum itself, and its history, along with that of its collections and exhibitions.

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