

**THE UNIVERSAL MUSEUM AND INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS: OBSTACLES TO THE FULL REALIZATION
OF MUSEUMS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY**

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Abstract

This paper will explore the evolving purpose of museums in the sphere of international relations. Reflecting on the intrinsic political potential of museums, a case will be made that they are valuable assets for international relations and, more specifically, cultural diplomacy. Contrasting their potential, the development of universal museums will highlight the current obstacles facing museums on their journey to becoming political actors. With the British Museum and AfricaMuseum as specific examples, the controversies facing museums are acknowledged through the lens of changing museological standards; these museums' approaches to museology further exemplify which museums are currently equipped for diplomatic use. By the end of this paper, readers will be able to recognize that museums are evolving in the direction of further involvement in international relations and that the current obstacles to this development are enveloped in the issues of unsustainable relationship-making, traditional museology, and lack of museum ethics.

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Introduction: What is a Museum?

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”¹

For decades, this above has been widely accepted as the understanding of “museum.”

This particular definition was adopted by the International Commission of Museums (ICOM) in 2007. Given that the ICOM is the only global organization that represents museums, their definition of “museum” captures the essence and purpose of museums around the world.²

From the inherent value of acquisition and conservation to the creative liberties of education and entertainment, the ICOM puts this definition forth as an all-encompassing image for museums. But almost 15 years later, museums are being redefined. The ICOM has initiated the conversation for a new definition that reflects the true nature of museums today. The ICOM has emphasized that this is a “democratic and open process” and that it serves as an opportunity for museum professionals to contribute their own vision for museums as a space and operation.³

At first glance, the adoption of a new definition might not seem necessary; since museums have maintained their position as protectors of culture and advocates of education, the prospect of them outgrowing a current definition seems unlikely. Because this remains an essential component of the purpose and mission of museums, the change lies in the extent to which museums are willing to expand and reform their efforts to accomplish these traditional goals. Whether it be reinterpreting exhibits for political relevancy or engaging in foreign policy, museums are looking beyond the institutional and physical boundaries within which they have comfortably resided for decades. Any definition upheld by the ICOM, therefore,

¹ “Museum Definition,” *International Council of Museums*, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

² “Missions and objectives,” *International Council of Museums*, accessed December 15, 2021, https://icom.museum/en/about-us/missions-and-objectives/#gf_1.

³ “Museum Definition.”

does not simply examine how museums currently operate, but rather sets the standard for how they should operate.

Motivated by this development, this paper will explore the potential role of museums in cultural diplomacy. Centering around their accreditation of soft power and contemporary diplomatic involvement, the behavior of museums in the international sphere will be seen through the lens of international relations. Furthermore, in exploring the current limitations of museums in being cultural diplomacy assets, the museology and practices of “universal museums” will be dissected. Two museums will act as the primary examples: The British Museum and The Royal Museum of Central Africa. With both museums sharing histories of attempted colonialist substantiation and unethical cultural heritage management, their behaviors and practices will be compared. This paper will make a case for the role of museums as cultural diplomacy assets while acknowledging the shortcomings of museums in supporting their nations’ foreign policy agenda. Resolutions to this ineffectiveness will be proposed as a means to further emphasize the potential future of museums in international relations.

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

In 1990, Joseph Nye Jr., a highly influential Harvard University political scientist, foreign policy theorist, and former government official, proposed the concept of “soft power” in a *Foreign Policy* article aptly titled “Soft Power.”⁴ Influenced by the post-Cold War idea that the United States holds the institutional and resource capabilities to project cultural values for foreign policy assistance, Nye made the argument that these institutions can accomplish diplomatic goals without coercion or the use of traditional “hard power.”⁵ According to Nye, this soft power is dependent on a state’s values, culture, and other

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153-171, accessed September 29, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.

⁵ *Ibid*, 167.

intangible assets that can be used as instruments for foreign policy influence.⁶ In using soft power, audiences are attracted to an agenda or policy rather than coerced into accepting it. Defending this, Nye recalls various diplomatic efforts of the past when political attractiveness was the deciding factor in times of conflict; during World War I, soft power had an important role in communicating attitudes, ideologies, and beliefs among combatant states. This came primarily in the form of propaganda with both the Allied Powers and the Central Powers competing to be seen as the more attractive party. This trend continued through World War II when Hollywood films were used as tools for dispensing propaganda and through the Cold War when radio broadcasts were used to advance pro-democracy ideas behind the Iron Curtain.⁷ These diplomatic efforts are best categorized as “cultural diplomacy.”

Cultural diplomacy, as defined by Johns Hopkins University political scientist Milton Cummings Jr, is “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding,”⁸ Also employing largely intangible assets, it is a practice that is emboldened by the use of soft power. Governments use this method of diplomacy to advance their self-interest in international relations. In the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union used cultural diplomacy to build an alliance with Czechoslovakia.⁹ By creating a system of cultural exchange¹⁰ through pen-pals, fashion magazines, and high-class balls the Soviet Union had ambitions of building a united front — a stronger Iron Curtain — when Czechoslovakia was once again expressing interest in Western European political ideologies. Nearby, the People’s Republic of China

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 94-95 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.

⁷ Ibid, 98.

⁸ John Lenczowski, “Cultural Diplomacy, Political Influence, and Integrated Strategy,” (United States: Institute of World Politics, 2007), https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20131028_JohnLenczowskiCulturalDiplomacypoliticalinfluenceandintegratedstrategy.pdf.

⁹ Rachel Appelbaum, “The Friendship Project: Socialist Internationalism in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 484–507, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.3.484>.

¹⁰ This cultural exchange has been dubbed “The Friendship Project” by Rachel Appelbaum.

began gifting pandas to politicians in other countries. A symbol of peace and friendship, pandas were a tangible reminder of China's political wish to spread influence.¹¹ Even music festivals, such as the Llangollen International Music Eisteddfod in Wales, UK, have acted as cultural diplomats; supported by British Council member Harold Tudor in the late 1940s, this festival became a promoter of "peace and harmony" in a post-World War II society.¹²

Soft power is not all-encompassing and even Nye concedes that hard power should be exercised appropriately, be it alone or in combination with soft power, a concept he called "smart power."¹³ Rather, soft power is unique in being a less aggressive approach to diplomacy. Within the realm of international relations, soft power has been used repeatedly as a measure to maintain, gain, or corrode trust in government power. Museums and other cultural institutions also use their soft power to bring attention to cultures, people, and issues that otherwise might fall through the cracks of government-run diplomatic initiatives. With a desire to bridge cultures through art and history, the soft power ability of museums as assets for cultural diplomacy is unmistakable. It provides an explanation as to why governments have channeled diplomacy through museums, but it also makes a case for why museums are equipped to pursue cultural diplomacy on their own terms. Their expertise in preserving culture, heritage, and audience makes their evolution into institutions of soft power a natural museological progression.

Qualities of a Diplomat

According to Ambassador Kishan Rana, diplomats require three qualities: persuasion, trust, and personal credibility.¹⁴ Through careful analysis of these diplomatic qualities,

¹¹ "Historical Acts of Cultural Diplomacy," *Academy for Cultural Diplomacy*, accessed October, 14, 2021, https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en_historical-acts-of-cd.

¹² "Our History," *Llangollen*, Internet, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://international-eisteddfod.co.uk/about-us/history/>.

¹³ Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 107.

¹⁴ Kishan Rana, "Persuasion, trust, and personal credibility," in *Persuasion, the essence of diplomacy*, ed. Jovan Kurbalija (Online Publication: DiploFoundation and Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, 2013), 83-89, accessed October 28, 2021, <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/persuasion-trust-and-personal-credibility/>.

evidence supports the assertion that museums are well equipped with these essential characteristics. Though museums themselves are not diplomats, the exploration of essential diplomatic qualities provides further evidence that museums can be harnessed as assets for cultural diplomacy. While the state recognizes museums as assets for cultural diplomacy because of their soft power, possessing these qualities is indicative of museums' positive public image.

1. Persuasion

Visuals have often aided governments in political ventures, from propaganda to the color of a politician's suit. In the article "European museums as visual persuasion: A typographical approach," researchers apply this same logic of visual persuasion to museums. Researchers categorized this visual persuasion into five sections: the museum as a cultural icon, the museum as polemic, the museum as collective memory, the museum as a partisan advocate, and the museum as visual persuasion.¹⁵ Discussing matters ranging from the purpose of museum construction to the value of a niche collection, the expansive nature of these categories highlights how museums are persuasive tools, explicitly and implicitly. Through their persuasiveness, obvious and/or subliminal messages about a given culture can be revealed.¹⁶

While it is well-known that governments can be persuasive, the effectiveness of such political persuasion can be harder to calculate. Professor Dr. Milan Jazbec, a Slovenian diplomat, even argues that "when persuasion becomes public, it immediately becomes pressure."¹⁷ While museums are able to use their mission as context for their actions, governments and government officials must carefully walk the line of being influential

¹⁵ J. Donald Ragsdale and et al, "European Museums as Visual Persuasion: A Typographical Approach," in *Intercultural Communicatio Studdies XVI*, no. 2 (2007): 145-157, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235257418_European_museums_as_visual_persuasion_A_typological_approach.

¹⁶ Ibid, 145-155.

¹⁷ Milan Jazbec, "Persuasion in sociology of diplomacy," in *Persuasion, the essence of diplomacy*, ed. Jovan Kurbalija (Online Publication: DiploFoundation and Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, 2013), 65-73, <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/persuasion-in-sociology-of-diplomacy/>.

without being demanding.

2. Trust

According to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), 98% of Americans trust museums.¹⁸ Additional AAM findings indicated that museums are believed to be the most reliable source of information,¹⁹ museums are seen as essential members of the community, and that a politician's support of museums would increase an individual's support for that politician. This extends beyond party lines; 97% of self-identified liberals and 93% of self-identified conservatives hold such views.

In contrast, only 20% of Americans trust the government and a mere 2% of Americans say they trust the government "all the time," according to 2020 studies done by the PEW Research Center. Public trust of the American government has hovered around 30% for the past two decades, highlighting a major obstacle for public diplomatic efforts coming from the federal government.²⁰

3. Personal credibility

Lastly, museums are widely regarded as credible. As with trust, the public finds museums to be credible because of their association with education, but also because of their approach to information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of information overload, museum credibility has risen. During 2020, credibility claims increased each quarter of the year — despite most museums being closed to the public. One study on this pattern found that, in the United States, museums are gaining more credibility while the federal government steadily loses it: a reflection of the public reevaluating who and what they find to be credible.²¹ Since the essential credibility is rooted in one's own credibility and not the

¹⁸ "Museum Facts & Data," *American Alliance of Museums*, Internet, accessed October 28, 2021, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museum-facts-data/>.

¹⁹ In comparison to local newspapers, researchers, and the government.

²⁰ "Americans' Views of Government: Low Trust, but Some Positive Performance Ratings," *Pew Research Center*, published September 14, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>.

²¹ Colleen Dilenschneider, "Data & Analysis: Credibility of Museums Continues to Increase During Pandemic (DATA)," *Colleendilen.com*, published 14 October 2020, <https://www.colleendilen.com/2020/10/14/credibility->

credentials it receives from another party, this independent operation of museums is vital. Museums produce their own credibility through their autonomy but also benefit from the decline of larger operations when they fail in asserting personal credibility.

Another research finding was that the increased online presence of museums built stronger relationships with consumers.²² This, in fact, is a form of cultural diplomacy. As museums branched out to develop their diplomatic projects, their audience, no matter how local or global, was receptive to this cultural information and even appreciated it. This online network of museums engaging in cultural diplomacy was, in turn, providing museums with the very qualities necessary for continuing their work in the cultural diplomacy field.

The Universal Museum

In 2002, the ICOM published the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of the Universal Museum.” This declaration, signed by the representatives of over a dozen well-known museums from the Western world, encourages museums to act on behalf of a greater human culture. This declaration states:

“...we should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation. Museums are agents in the development of culture, whose mission is to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation. Each object contributes to that process. To narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted would therefore be a disservice to all visitors.”²³

Supporters of this museology argue that museums with diverse and multicultural collections ought to take advantage of their position by interpreting the collection as “world heritage.” They also argue that the objects in these collections, regardless of acquisition measures, “have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them.”²⁴ Opponents of this museological identity

[of-museums-continues-to-increase-during-pandemic-data/](#).

²² Dilenschneider, “Data & Analysis.”

²³ “Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums,” *State Hermitage Museum*, accessed November 2, 2021, https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/news/news-item/news/1999_2013/hm11_1_93/?lng=.

²⁴ “Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums.”

suggest that this is a recommencement of colonial practices. In January 2020, the BBC Radio 4 Program “Curating the Future,” *Apollo Magazine* contributor Fatema Ahmed remarked that the concept of the universal museum “retraces some of the language of colonialism — that the colonizer is universal but you are specific.”²⁵ These nuanced attitudes towards the universal museum have, in turn, created conflicted attitudes towards museums in cultural diplomacy. To a certain extent, the rudimentary standards of reinterpretation, cultural appreciation, and civic engagement appear to support cultural diplomacy; to be diplomatically harnessed, a museum needs to have a thorough understanding of cultural importance. Nonetheless, the history of museums, object acquisition, and strong sentiments of western superiority have hindered the diplomatic impact of museums.

This is especially true when it comes to the cultural impact of repatriation and cultural heritage claims over objects. This declaration claims that “monumental works that were installed decades and even centuries ago in museums throughout Europe and America were acquired under conditions that are not comparable with current ones.”²⁶ This is essentially providing an exemption for universal museums on upholding ethical obligations of repatriation, solely based on the fact that they are not responsible for the previous manner of acquisition. Universal museums are now, consequently, conservative in their repatriation efforts, acting in favor of “global heritage”, rather than the original owners. This “global heritage” is an adroit attempt to assert a level of authority beyond their legal right to ownership; in refusing to recognize distinct cultural ownership, universal museums are ineffectively employing their soft power for museological development and rather are reinforcing the artifice of Western institutional superiority. In order for museums, especially those of great influence, to use their diplomatic capabilities for the greater good of cultural

²⁵ Geraldine Kendall Adams, “Does the argument that museums hold collections on behalf of the world still stand?,” *Museumsassociation.org*, published January 17, 2020, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/01/17012020-does-universality-argument-still-stand/#>.

²⁶ “Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums.”

discourse, then the damaging attitude of universality must be separated from the museum.

The Guggenheim Museum: A Previous Encounter with Cultural Diplomacy

Having discussed the potential diplomatic utility of all museums and the contemporary attitudes towards universal museums, there is also a need for contextualizing the previous efforts of museums in being cultural diplomacy assets. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of a museum engaging in cultural diplomacy. Through its satellite museums and consequent international framework, the Guggenheim was an early pioneer in this sector.

The Guggenheim is a famously influential and innovative museum. Since it opened in 1959,²⁷ the museum has experimented with opening several satellite campuses: The Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Bilbao, Spain, and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.²⁸ Each one of these locations is “culturally distinct” and has an important role in the self-described “constellation” of museums.²⁹ In the planning document for Guggenheim Helsinki,³⁰ a universal museum mindset is clearly outlined.

In an attempt to promote the project, the Guggenheim emphasized the unique character of Guggenheim and The Helsinki Art Museum, an institution that would become part of Guggenheim Helsinki. It stated:

The Guggenheim’s network of museums brings an outstanding program, considerable expertise, access to collections, and relationships with artists. The Helsinki Art Museum brings a deep local understanding and an impressive curatorial and education team. A museum combining these elements would help contextualize Finnish design and architecture within the broader tradition of modern art while exposing Finnish audiences to artworks from the various collections within the Guggenheim’s global

²⁷ “History,” *The Guggenheim Museum*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.guggenheim.org/history>.

²⁸ “About Us,” *The Guggenheim Museum*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.guggenheim.org/about-us>.

²⁹ “The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation,” *The Guggenheim Museum*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.guggenheim.org/foundation>.

³⁰ Guggenheim Helsinki failed to become a satellite location after it was struck down by the city board. Nonetheless, its planning documents provide insight into the cultural diplomatic strategies of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

network that have never before visited Finland.³¹

The creation of Guggenheim Helsinki was proposed as “mutually beneficial” for all involved by furthering relationship opportunities with other nations and museums and by strengthening the local cultural sector. Throughout it all, however, there was a maintained focus on Guggenheim’s museological identity and branding.³² Having experienced a high when its first satellite location in Bilbao, Spain was met with great success and gave rise to the “Bilbao Effect,”³³ that Guggenheim was working tirelessly to replicate its success. With an image to uphold, it orchestrated numerous attempts at satellite museums, failing repeatedly.³⁴ In the case of Guggenheim Helsinki, cultural diplomacy suffered a setback when the Finnish government refused to fund the project and city counselors had to strike the deal down.³⁵

What is to account for this gradual lack of government interest in the Guggenheim system? Between the creation of Guggenheim Bilbao and the proposal of Guggenheim Helsinki, the institution designated itself as a universal museum. Guggenheim’s goal of attaining more space and objects is conducive to neither the current digital culture nor the push for reinterpreting collections. The shortcomings of this universal museum mentality were recognized through Guggenheim’s negative experience with cultural diplomacy as well as its overcompensation in material identity. It is a testament to the universal museum’s short-sightedness in being a cultural diplomacy asset.

A Diplomatic History of the British Museum

³¹ Drury, et al., “Concept and Development Study for Guggenheim Helsinki,” (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2011,) 10, https://www.hel.fi/hel2/kanslia/guggenheim/ps/concept_and_development_study_for_a_guggenheim_helsinki_a_3.pdf.

³² Ibid, 8.

³³ The “Bilbao Effect” is the concept of making a financial, cultural, and even architectural investment in a community, particularly by a prominent cultural institution.

³⁴ Jane Morris, “The Guggenheim Bilbao, 20 Years Later: How a Museum Transformed a City — and Why the ‘Bilbao Effect’ Has Been Impossible to Replicate,” *ArtNet News*, published October 12, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/the-bilbao-effect-20th-anniversary-1111583>.

³⁵ Jon Henley, “Guggenheim Helsinki museum plans rejected by city councillors,” *The Guardian*, published December 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/01/guggenheim-helsinki-nixed-by-city-councillors>.

The British Museum prides itself as “the first national public museum of the world.” Founded in 1753 by Sir Hans Sloane, the British Museum has pursued a life-long initiative of “critical scrutiny of all assumptions, open debate, scientific research, progress and tolerance,” a mission guided by the ideas and values of the Enlightenment.³⁶ These ideals, however, have come under question by museum professionals, legal scholars, and the public as their ownership of certain collection pieces is heavily debated. The Parthenon Marbles,³⁷ Benin Bronzes, and Moai statues are just three notable examples of objects at the British Museum whose ownership are contested.³⁸ The former museum director Neil MacGregor responded to these allegations numerous times, but relentlessly pursued the concept of the British Museum’s civic duty and the complexity of culture; in his 2004 article written for the *Guardian*, he argued that “controversy over ownership of [the British Museum]’s treasures obscures [the museum]’s purpose.”³⁹

Cultural diplomacy at the British Museum has undergone several changes since MacGregor first joined the museum in 2002, the same year the museum signed the “Declaration on the Importance and Value of the International Museum.” From loaning the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg a Parthenon Marble⁴⁰ to helping Iraq rebuild its destroyed heritage sites,⁴¹ the British Museum has used its global prestige to create numerous relationships. In the British Museum’s 2020 Museum Strategy, it mentions not only its current status as a global museum, but also its ambitions to further develop this image.⁴²

³⁶ “The British Museum story,” *The British Museum*, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story>.

³⁷ The British Museum typically refers to them as the Parthenon Marbles, in favor of their origin rather than Lord Elgin, the man who orchestrated their removal from Greece.

³⁸ “Contested objects from the collection,” *The British Museum*, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection>.

³⁹ Neil MacGregor, “The whole world in our hands,” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jul/24/heritage.art>.

⁴⁰ Neil MacGregor, “Loan of a Parthenon sculpture to the Hermitage,” *Museum Stories* (blog), December 5, 2014, <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/loan-of-a-parthenon-sculpture-to-the-hermitage-a-marble-ambassador-of-a-european-ideal/>.

⁴¹ “Iraq Scheme,” *The British Museum*, accessed 30 October 2021, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/international/iraq-scheme>.

⁴² “Towards 2020, The British Museum’s Strategy,” *British Museum*, published October 2019, https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/Towards_2020-The_British_Museum_Strategy.pdf.

In addition to exhibition loans and financial support, the British Museum has used social media to build relationships with the general public. With over 2 million followers on Instagram and over 1.6 million on Facebook, the museum highlights its collection and initiatives to an interested audience, undoubtedly boosting its popularity. The British Museum's approach to dealing with its contested items has been to frame those objects in the greater mission of the museum; to educate the public on all histories and cultures.

A Diplomatic History of AfricaMuseum

Since museums ostensibly function as repositories of culture, art, and history, they have often been used to initiate political conversations with the public. At AfricaMuseum, this has been manifested through a drastic change in the institution's mission. Founded as a "propaganda tool" of King Leopold II of Belgium, the AfricaMuseum was originally a proud display of Western European colonialism, an early example of soft power in the museum world. Over one hundred years later, the museum has since begun to deconstruct this image. After shutting down for a five-year renovation project to reinterpret its collections, the museum has repositioned itself as "a place of memory on the colonial past and strives to be a dynamic platform for exchanges and dialogues between cultures and generations."⁴³ In doing so, the museum has taken an interest in heritage restitution, conservation of nature, and research as a means to correct its role in disseminating colonial narratives.

In the museum's Annual Report for 2019, the first annual report since its reopening, several programs and initiatives are exemplary of this progressive approach. With an emphasis on "co-creation," a residency program, school partnerships, research programs, and partnerships with museums in the Central Africa region have been introduced to fuel multi-cultural discourse.⁴⁴ AfricaMuseum is engaging in cultural diplomacy while also taking a

⁴³ "Mission, ethics, and organisation," *AfricaMuseum*, accessed October 7, 2021, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/about_us/mission_organisation.

⁴⁴ "Annual Report 2019," *AfricaMuseum*, 10-12, accessed October 7, 2021, https://www.africamuseum.be/sites/default/files/media/about-us/annual-reports/doc/AFRICAMUSEUM_annualreport2019_EN.pdf.

restorative stance. By seeking out and including Congolese scientists, researchers, and artists, AfricaMuseum is not only demonstrating the museum's interest in "co-creation," but is also making it known to the Belgian and Congolese public that restoring this relationship is possible. Their successful efforts of conservation transcend multiple boundaries, from the destroyed environment in central Africa to the tattered relationship with the Congolese people who experienced generations of degradation.⁴⁵

Analyzing their Effectiveness as Cultural Diplomacy Assets

Through comparison of the British Museum and AfricaMuseum, several shortcomings of universal museums are made apparent. As institutions of significant soft power, their responsibility goes beyond the traditional institutional limitations of the museum structure and extends into international relations; their actions are important on a museological and political level.

The actions of the British Museum have continued to fuel animosity towards museums in the international sphere. The refusal of the British Museum to commit to repatriation, continued emphasis of tangible objects and space, and selective relationship-building therefore highlights how universal museums are institutions of unethical practices, out-dated museology, and unsustainable relationships. While this is not exclusive to the universal museum structure, their identity as such is reflective of their identity as highly influential and prestigious; museums of this caliber need to be held accountable for their actions to further capitalize on the developing a reciprocal relationship between museum and state.

Obstacle #1: Selective Relationship-Building

While social media is useful as a platform for building an audience, a larger audience

⁴⁵ "Annual Report 2019," *AfricaMuseum*, 27. A research study run by AfricaMuseum explored the damage of colonialization on the environment in central Africa. Findings are published in the book *Wildlife and colonization. A history of destruction and protection of nature in Congo (1885-1960)*

cannot be a substitute for sustainable relations with other museums that act as cultural diplomacy assets. The public audience is becoming increasingly aware of the problematic behavior of the British Museum; in December 2021, *Vice Media* released an Instagram filter that tells the stories of disputed objects as “The Unfiltered History Tour” of the British Museum.⁴⁶ The use of social media tools such as this highlights the ability of social media to raise awareness on a global scale, no matter the narrative that has been perpetuated. Inasmuch as the British Museum, as with many other well-known museums, has used social media to further its influence, other organizations can quickly dismantle it simply by giving a platform to the true histories behind museum collections.

The British Museum also invests in relationships that do not push back on the legality of their collection; this is why they would rather send a Parthenon Marble to Russia on their own terms than put it on loan at the Acropolis Museum, a museum built for Grecian statues and relics such as the marbles. The Antonio Salinas Regional Archeological Museum in Italy is a museum that has recently started a long-term relationship with the Acropolis Museum. In November 2021, the two museums announced that they will each be beginning a long-term loan; a statue of Athena and a protogeometric vase are expected to go to Italy and a Parthenon frieze will be going to Greece.⁴⁷ As cultural diplomacy assets for two nations that have experienced looting of antiquities, this move demonstrates a willingness to appeal to calls for repatriation while also further building a diplomatic relationship between nations through the use of museums.

Obstacle #2: Traditional Approaches to Museology

Additionally, the museum’s hyperfixation on keeping contested objects in its

⁴⁶ Dipo Faloyin, “The True Stories of 10 of the Most Disputed Objects at the British Museum,” *Vice*, published December 8, 2021, [://www.vice.com/en/article/3abdd3/unfiltered-history-tour-ten-disputed-artefacts-british-museum](https://www.vice.com/en/article/3abdd3/unfiltered-history-tour-ten-disputed-artefacts-british-museum).

⁴⁷ Archeology Newsroom, “Fragment of the Parthenon frieze has been returned from Italy,” *Arxaiologia*, published November 1, 2021, <https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2021/11/30/fragment-of-the-parthenon-frieze-has-been-returned-from-italy/>.

collection indicates that its identity is closely tied to the artifacts it owns. This self-identification is likely the result of a museology which, much like the current ICOM definition of museum, is a traditional yet insufficient approach. In the wake of contemporary soft power and cultural diplomacy efforts, museums are needing to reinterpret their museological practices. This is reflected in ICOM's search for a new definition and in present day examples of museums adopting new standards.

Published in the journal *America's Museums* in 1999, the article "What is the Object of this Exercise" by Elaine Huemann Gurian proposes that the purpose of objects in a museum is to "[make] an implicit thesis visible and tangible." Furthermore, she expresses how the importance of an object is that a diverse audience can share in experiencing its expressed story.⁴⁸ While the universal museum makes claims to do this through displaying the "universal heritage" of humanity, the objects are often partial to a certain culture or region. One museum, the Queens Museum in New York, has recognized the need for cultural significance but is exploring it without a reliance on antiquities and artifacts. Sally Tallant, President and Executive Director of the Queens Museum, expresses her ambition in a UNESCO Courier article "Reimagining museums for the future:"

At the Queens Museum, we will embrace the uncertainty of this moment and trust that artists, writers, designers, poets and architects can help us to remake the museum. We are developing a model of a museum that puts artists, educators and organizers at its centre. We will work in coalition with cultural, educational and community partners locally and create the conditions to support the production of work, ideas and collaboration. We will employ artists from our communities and will provide studio space, support, resources, technical support and mentors to create intergenerational and international conversations. We will reimagine how the museum can operate and focus on production on-site, and in our neighbourhoods.

Education is at the heart of our work and we will continue to develop digital content and will broadcast from the museum as well as convene and create much needed moments of connection and intimacy. We will be hyper-local and international in our reach.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Elaine Huemann Gurian, "What is the Object of this Exercise?," in *Reinterpreting the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2004), 282.

⁴⁹ Sally Tallant, "Reimagining museums for the future," *The UNESCO Courier*, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2020-3/reimagining-museums-future>.

In this, Tallant is expressing the need for a museum model that looks outward to the people rather than inward towards its collection. This is their approach to being a cultural diplomacy asset; despite not highlighting a collection of ancient ruins or masterpieces, Queens Museum is building museum-audience relationships, supporting local artists, and offering a space for intellectual and artistic experimentation. In turn, this builds local and global networks of culturally minded creatives that transcend national and cultural boundaries.

If universal museums like the British Museum are trying to be culturally ambiguous, then they cannot continue to rely solely on their collections. If an aforementioned “implicit thesis” does not support their claim of cultural appreciation, then these museums are not using their objects appropriately. Like the Guggenheim, the British Museum has attempted to combine these traditional strategies of the past with culturally minded strategies of the future, but in doing so has violated contemporary procedures regarding cultural diversity. This preferential treatment is antithetical to the museum’s pretense of cultural sensitivity.

Obstacle #3: Lack of Ethics

All museums are officially obligated to follow basic rules of ethics. Calls for repatriation have inundated the museological field as museum ethics are enforced, but also as cultural appreciation becomes a motivator of museum practice. In the “ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums,” ICOM outlines the importance of museum collaboration with the paternal countries of objects:

When a country or people of origin seeks the restitution of an object or specimen that can be demonstrated to have been exported or otherwise transferred in violation of the principles of international and national conventions, and shown to be part of that country’s or people’s cultural or natural heritage, the museum concerned should, if legally free to do so, take prompt and responsible steps to cooperate in its return.⁵⁰

In this, ICOM clearly states that the ethical consideration of repatriation is the responsibility of the museum. Yet, museums involved in collection disputes have been slow to act. On one

⁵⁰ “ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums,” *International Council of Museums*, 33, published 2017, <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>.

hand, this is a direct impact of ICOM's declaration of the universal museum; museums that have been self-identifying as culturally invaluable are now wary of disrupting the continuity of their powerful image. Such is the case with the British Museum. Held back by the prospects of being an encyclopedic institution, it remains adamant about its inherent need for objects to stay where they have been historically "cared" for. This not only limits the potential for relationship building but also strengthens the UK's intrinsic ties to colonialist practices and its imperial legacy.

The British Museum has the responsibility to return contested objects. In the case of the Parthenon Marbles, the Hellenic Republic Ministry of Affairs cites this issue as one that prevents public relations between Greece and the UK from reaching their full potential.⁵¹ In recent times,⁵² Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has made numerous pleas for the marbles to return home to Greece — even if it would be on loan — and in November 2021, reiterated his opposition in a conversation with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. In response, Johnson put responsibility in the hands of the trustees of the British Museum.⁵³ Despite having permission from the British government to return the objects if they see fit, the British Museum has refused to follow through on its basic ethical obligation to cooperate in tangible cultural heritage return, as outlined by the ICOM's Code of Ethics for Museums. Rather, it has continued to call the marbles a "monument of global heritage" and appealed to its own exclusive self-interest in being a universal museum.

If the British Museum were to follow through on repatriation efforts, as called for by UNESCO, it would highlight a high level of accountability. With only 23% of Britons supporting the keeping of the marbles at the British Museum, it would demonstrate a

⁵¹ "Greece's Bilateral Relations: United Kingdom," *Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/blog/greece-bilateral-relations/united-kingdom/>.

⁵² The British Museum's housing of the Parthenon Marbles has long been a subject of conversation and critique; in recent times, this conversation has become more diversified to include the involvement of the public.

⁵³ Gareth Harris, "Boris Johnson says British Museum trustees must decide fate of the Parthenon Marbles," *The Art Newspaper*, published November 17, 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/11/17/boris-johnson-says-british-museum-trustees-must-decide-fate-of-the-parthenon-marbles>.

receptiveness to international bodies and the will of Britons alike.⁵⁴ Yet, the British Museum is unresponsive to the wishes of the UK, both at the public and government level. As a museum of great prestige, the British Museum has the potential to set precedence in self-accountability for following ethical procedures. This would not only be a precedent for universal museums, but for all museums. Despite the damage that these ownership conflicts have had on the British Museum's reputation and on the museum image as a whole, the museum remains adamantly opposed to even the prospect of loans and repatriation. All the while, smaller museums such as the Antonio Salinas Regional Archeological Museum remain effective cultural diplomacy assets simply by following basic ethical standards.

Lessons from AfricaMuseum

In recent years, AfricaMuseum has begun to build relationships with Central Africa, moved away from traditional museological practices, and introduced repatriation efforts.⁵⁵ The previously mentioned renovation and cross-cultural programs are demonstrative of these initiatives to become an effective cultural diplomacy asset and to correct the wrongs it previously stood for. Fully aware of its colonialist past, it has taken up the responsibility of reconciling with it. Though a smaller museum, new to the world of cultural sensitivity, AfricaMuseum is headed in the right direction and is assuming accountability. AfricaMuseum recognizes, unlike the British Museum, that its potential is greater than its defined purpose.

In all of its initiatives, an understanding of the museum's soft power has been exhibited. AfricaMuseum's experience with soft power began when it acted as an asset for the colonialist policies of Belgium. Taking the blame for much of Belgium's involvement with cultural heritage theft, AfricaMuseum has had a negative image since shortly after it was created. It is now tasked with rebranding on behalf of the institution itself, but also Belgium as a whole. Using AfricaMuseum's museological transformation as a catalyst for

⁵⁴ "Greece offers sculpture swap in bid for Parthenon marbles."

⁵⁵ "Restitution policy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa."

conversation, Belgium has also been engaging in conversation about its colonialist legacy. This direction was further engrained when Belgium took measures to enact a legal framework for restitution.

According to AfricaMuseum's Restitution Policy web page, State Secretary Thomas Dermine outlined the proposed repatriation policy at AfricaMuseum on July 6, 2021. He stated that beginning in 2022, greater attention will be paid firstly to the study of provenances and secondly to "initiate a dialogue with the authorities of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in order to provide them with a framework to facilitate the return of legal ownership of all property for which a provenance study concludes that its possession by Belgium is illegitimate."⁵⁶ The announcement of these procedures at AfricaMuseum insinuates not only the museum's role in this new standard, but also that the museum has the support of the government in returning the property that fell into its care as a result of colonialist policies and actions.

The recent development of AfricaMuseum underscores the need for museums and museum administrations to take accountability for their actions: both historical and contemporary. By looking to build sustainable relationships, reinterpreting their museological practices, and following ethical standards for repatriation, AfricaMuseum has the potential to help Belgium acknowledge and apologize for its damaging impact on the Central Africa region. Though just the beginning of many efforts of Belgium to fully account for its actions, it should act as a motivator for the museums and governments faced with similar ethical responsibilities, such as the British Museum and the British Government.

The Museum is not Dying. It is Evolving.

The British Museum and AfricaMuseum, though the primary examples of this paper, are not the only museums with the potential to provide aid for cultural diplomacy nor are they

⁵⁶ "Restitution policy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa."

the only ones presently involved. Rather, the comparison of a large, reputable museum and a smaller, less prestigious museum highlights how the distinguishing factor of diplomatic potential for museums does not come from its size or existing reputation. Despite this, many museums face obstacles to reaching their full potential as cultural diplomacy assets. The lack of sustainable relationships, traditional museum structures and practices, and inconsistent ethical standards are obstacles today, but could be remedied for the future.

Every museum is unique, each with its own experiences, collections, and network to be utilized. In overcoming the aforementioned barriers, this potential can be realized. Even the universal museums, though they require further accountability, are capable of not only overcoming these obstacles but also benefiting from them; overcoming these obstacles would prepare these museums to adapt to the ever-changing museological industry, attitudes, and definition. As a result, every museum possesses a unique and valuable role to play in foreign affairs and international relations. While the concept and role of museums are changing, the principal qualification of soft power opens the door for a great opportunity; museums have the ability to address social concerns, create space for cultural and artistic exchange, and build community. A new ICOM definition is demonstrative of increasing awareness of the potential of museums and the need to help usher in a new generation of museums that are not exclusively defined by its traditional boundaries of space, collection, and conservation. As the ICOM concludes its search for an appropriate definition, perhaps one thing will remain clear: museums will never be easily defined.

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