



The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Travel and Tourism

Museums

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Book Title: The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Travel and Tourism

Chapter Title: "Museums"

Pub. Date: 2017

Access Date: July 11, 2017

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781483368948

Online ISBN: 9781483368924

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483368924.n317>

Print pages: 856-857

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Research about the travel industry confirms that cultural tourism and heritage tourism are among the fastest growing segments of the international tourism industry and are powerful socioeconomic development tools for both developed and developing nations. These forms of tourism are directed toward experiencing the arts, heritage, and activities that represent the stories and people of the past and present. Museums, by simple virtue of living out their mission—the accumulation, preservation, research, and exhibition of generations of cultural experience and humanitarian traditions of humankind, coded in artifacts and other objects and activities of human heritage—become relevant spaces for tourists seeking connection and engagement with human cultures of the past and the present.

Through their work, museums have not only succeeded in expanding markets and connecting people, they have also become a means for the sustenance of cultural and heritage resources in their host nations with vital revenue, and awareness through education. Museums support cultural and heritage tourism through education, public history, and heritage preservation.

From Muse to Museum

The word *museum* is used for different types of contemporary depositories for the storage of various cultural, historical, and educational items. *Museum* is derived from the Latin word *Museum*, meaning place for learned occupation, which had roots in the Greek *Mouseion*, seat of the Muses—the nine mythical Greek divinities (goddesses) of the arts and sciences. These traditionally symbolized the inspiration of creativity and knowledge and its attainment. As the Muses of the Greek nation belonged to a culture that positioned the quest and attainment of knowledge as a stimulant and cornerstone of its imperial enterprises and continued existence, they played a crucial role in Greek national identity, social stability, and advancement; they were held in high esteem and worshipped. Cults of the Muses were encouraged in the Greek *polis* (city state) and many regions within the imperial ambit of the Greeks. Many thinkers and political leaders thought that the Muses could inspire humans to achieve the *Sommum Bonum* (the highest good in life).

The Greek statesman and poet Solon was also convinced that the Muses were key to the good life and sought to perpetuate Muse veneration, which he believed would motivate Greece in the pursuit of prosperity and friendship. Temple depositories were built for the offerings made to the Muses, which marked the beginning of Western museums. Elsewhere in the world, other non-European cultures were also busy creating and dedicating special consecrated places to their spirit guides and their revered objects, which, they believed, also inspired people to virtuous living. In Africa, for example, there existed sacred sanctuaries. Just as the goddesses inspired the Greeks, Africans too were inspired by their gods, goddesses, and ancestral spirits and resorted to these for directions for living. Masks, totems, stools, and other prized objects were some of the special cultural objects believed to be inhabited by and animated by these spirits, which functioned within the context of customary spirituality. Communities practicing and using these objects dedicated special huts to them. Shrines were built not only for religious objects, families also kept special rooms for family relics that linked them to the past. Sometimes entire spaces and villages were so revered that they were protected. These, and similar depositories in Asia, the Americas, and Australasia, were the first museum-temples of the world.

The decline of power that religion wielded over evolving civilizations led to the destruction of the first museum-temples and the secularization and transformation of the museum concept. The idea of the museum as an institution collecting and preserving collections was well

established by the 18th century. The expansion of European trade into other continents brought many unusual goods into Europe. Such exotic items became symbols and givers of high social prestige for the owners, mostly aristocrats. By the early part of the 20th century, *museum* meant a building storing cultural material that the public could access. However, due to many societal influences, the stress on the building eventually became less pronounced though not overtaken by newer concepts. There have evolved avant-garde concepts, such as the museum as a building preserved as an object, which is the open air museum; an interpreted outdoor environment, which is the eco-museum; and most recently, an entity existing in electronic form, in cyberspace, which is the virtual museum of the 21st century.

Outside of Europe, the sacred space concept, rather than assume an altogether new personality, evolved into a hybrid, which maintained the old, and assimilated the new. Temples and lodges housing personal collections belonging to men of renown, which sang their praises, and those that celebrated the gods and ancestors existed side by side. Political heads kept collections of diverse objects, which, though not accessible to the public, were quite similar to the contemporary-style museum of the West. Chief Osei-Bonsu, of Asante, Ghana, owned a house stocked with objects made in gold and bounties of war as testament of his bravery and the greatness of his West African chiefdom. The storehouses were occasionally opened to special people, to celebrate the wealth and greatness of their owners.

Because they stored artifacts of community and national interest, and existed as repositories that used traditional methods to collect, categorize, and conserve objects, relics, and material culture that told stories of the lives and histories of political leaders and their people, the buildings and collections of the non-Western-styled depositories were not called museums until the mid-20th century when the countries that owned them adopted the Western concept. They also conformed the identity of their repositories to that of the museum of the West, with its multiple functions as repository and center of conservation, research, and education.

Today, these museums have become more than places for the privileged and elite few to display and glory in their laurels and vanities, and for the “common” person to view the indulgences of “great” people. They now exist for the benefit of society. The eminent museologist Georges Henri Rivière described the modern museum as an institution in the service of the society that claims, conserves, communicates, and presents goods held to be representative of nature and man, with the goal of increasing knowledge and safekeeping and developing educational and cultural patrimony and legacy. Museums can afford us a vista of cultural expressions in different social and geographic spaces and time, leading us to an understanding of ourselves and the common cultural heritage that humankind shares.

Museums and Cultural and Heritage Tourism

In recent times, there has been a focus on the contributions that museums have made and continue to make on the growth and development of cultural and heritage tourism. Tourism literature in the 21st century presents museum-tourist encounters in many past and present contexts.

Culture- and heritage-seeking tourists of today who frequent museums are part of a tradition reaching back to the 16th century, when museums in Europe were first opened to the public. The elite and affluent who wished to acquaint themselves with the wonders of the far and distant civilizations through encounters with ancient relics and artifacts visited museums. In time, however, these visits ceased to be just for elite tourists and their families; today, any tourist can walk into a museum and learn something about his or her past and about others

by experiencing the material culture items therein.

Visits to museums by tourists are not for the sole purpose of satisfying curiosity and discovery. They are also recreational opportunities for people of all sexes, ages, and physical abilities, to enjoy some leisure time, individually and collectively. They allow people to explore and build cultural identities and find meaning and a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing, expanding, and complex world.

Museums' Roles in Education and Preservation

The roles that museums play in cultural and heritage tourism, and the forces that shape them, are complex, as are the motivation and needs that compel tourists to visit museums. Most museums, especially those that belong to the International Council of Museums, cater to the education of the tourist and work to preserve cultural heritage. Museums provide educational programs that allow visitors to experience and learn about the history and the cultural and natural heritage of a country, city, town, or village of interest, or about a chosen subject of interest. They also provide services such as access and security, which enhance visiting experiences for tourists.

Museums also support the preservation and conservation of heritage resources in their host communities. They preserve the museum collections, and some also work to preserve the environment around the museums. Natural elements such as the sea, over time, can damage heritage resources. An example of this is the "castle" slave dungeons on the coasts of Ghana, which are currently experiencing severe corrosion from sun, sea salt, and ocean winds.

There is growing concern about the impact some forms of tourism developments is having on the environment. Examples abound in almost every country in the world of tourism development threatening the survival of communities, sites, and monuments and objects of cultural value through environmental degradation. In Egypt, the pyramids are threatened by a large number of visitors. The Taj Mahal in India is suffering wear and tear from the inflow of huge numbers of visitors.

Museums carry out education programs and campaigns to inform host communities of the threats against their heritage resources and offer training in heritage conservation and environmentally friendly practices for community heads and youth volunteers, in efforts to counteract degradation and depletion of resources. Also, funds raised by museums from the sale of education services to tourists are redirected into restoration projects, to offset the negative impact of tourist presence and destructive tourism development practices on the heritage resources, over which they, museums, are custodians.

Shifts in the roles played by museums in cultural and heritage tourism are expected to result from rapid societal changes occurring in the 21st century. Doubtless, the core roles of education and preservation will remain. However, the needs, interests, and visiting behavior of the tourist alter with time and museums of the world must adopt newer approaches to their work, especially in exhibition, advocacy, partnership, and helping to effect social change.

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See also [Anthropology of Tourism](#); [Architecture and Tourism](#); [Commodification of Culture](#); [Cultural Tourism](#); [Heritage Tourism](#); [Sociocultural Issues Related to Tourism](#); [Wonders of the World Old and New](#)

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