**COMMENTARY**

**Museums, audiences and collections: thinking about historical context**

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Contemporary debate about cultural engagement generally takes place with little sense of historical patterns, and a longer-term perspective on one aspect (attendance) of one part of the cultural sector (museums), is therefore welcome. Historical comparisons, whether over time or place, present challenges, not least ensuring that variables are understood in their context. Historians of quantitative data, in particular, have reminded us that measurement commonly brings a phenomenon into existence rather than capturing some pre-existing reality. We see this with everyday concepts such as GDP, invented in the 1930s to define a particular sense of the economy when there are other ways of assessing economic performance. Or unemployment, which started being measured when it appeared as a political and social concept rather than when people started being without paid work, and official definitions of unemployment have been notoriously unstable. The rigour of census tables present occupations and status as if the classification emanated from the reality itself rather than being the product of contemporary intellectual and social preoccupations (Desrosières & Thévenot 1979). So, when we turn to museum attendance, we need to ask what issues were meant to be addressed by capturing these statistics. In recent decades they’ve been collected by museums for presentation to government and other funders, but was that true in the past? They were certainly not collected for the use of future historians, especially those interested in questions of our own day.

Policy debate needs an awareness of past initiatives even if, when looking at issues around museums in the nineteenth century and today, I’m as struck by the differences as by the similarities. This becomes most evident when we analyse the past in its distinctive context, one that embraces not only audience numbers and associated discourses, but the museum objectives within which those elements find their place. Debate about museum audiences is prominent today and it is fascinating to reach back into the past to find similar issues being raised. The language of social description is nonetheless a minefield, with terms such as artisans, mechanics, labouring poor and working men being less socio-economic categories than moral descriptors. The dichotomy between ‘artisan’ and ‘labourer’ which stalks the pages of parliamentary inquiries and speeches by museum leaders hardly fitted the complexity of the Victorian working class but its moral power ensured its presence even in the more systematic analyses of Levi and Booth (Levi, 1885; Booth, 1902-03; Crossick, 1991) None of this should surprise us but is a key element of context for our historical analysis.

The drive to establish museums in Britain from the 1860s was one dimension of how liberal bourgeois elites reconfigured their towns and it is within that process that their development and the discourse about museum visitors must be interpreted. Museums were part of a substantial investment in social overhead capital alongside schools and hospitals, town halls and parks, baths and libraries, water and gas supplies (Daunton, 2001). This spending on public goods built a civic infrastructure, paid initially from philanthropy but then increasingly carried out by the same elites through their municipality. In late nineteenth-century Leeds, for example, urban institutions spread as members of the elite on the municipal corporation urged it to become a cultural sponsor (Morris, 1980). Birmingham’s Museum & Art Gallery started with a 1878 donation of £5,000 by Richard Tangye, head of the engineering company, who subsequently presented the family’s large collection of Wedgwood pottery as well as its paintings with other local leaders pitching in (Wallis, 1911). Birmingham’s elite proclaimed a particular municipal and civic vision, but most towns across provincial England had their own versions of this story

The Mayor of Walsall set its new modest Art Gallery & Museum in context during the ceremonial opening of the institution in 1892. He lauded the elite’s move from a municipal concern only for ‘a pretty free use of the gaol and the workhouse’ some 60 years previously to the last 20 years when free libraries and loan exhibitions had followed gasworks, sanitation, parks and recreation grounds, baths and educational institutions (*Walsall Observer*, 1892)[[1]](#endnote-1). The civic and economic infrastructure of town life included commercial ventures such as department stores, themselves inspired by the great exhibitions of arts and science and interacting in an arena of public display and entertainment. Department stores were as active in proclaiming the numbers coming through their doors as were museums (Crossick & Jaumain, 1999).

The specific arguments for museums and their audiences sat within this framework, rooted in a vision of how social order and progress were maintained in an evolving liberal society. They sought a variety of visitors: scholars, artists, copyists and the educated elite were all targeted as well as the working class. Meanwhile, an emphasis on inspiring technical and design excellence sat alongside goals for working-class improvement. The former was an objective of the Department of Science & Art, set up after the 1851 Exhibition, whose loans from the South Kensington Museum were essential for many provincial museums. The civilising power of the arts and moral improvement was just one important driver. In Manchester’s major museums Rees Leahy and McCombe find a combination of educational, social and aesthetic purposes, with only Ancoats Art Museum, founded by the reformer TC Horsfall, articulating a coherent vision to create social and spiritual resources for people in the margins of the city (Rees Leahy & McCombe, 2015). A balance between industrial design, moral improvement and education was present in provincial museums as the century drew to a close, blended unevenly into a confident vision of their purpose. We need to be cautious about extrapolating from the discourse around a handful of large London national museums in the 1840s and 1850s to the motives of those who established museums in towns across provincial England in the subsequent decades. These museums make sense only in the larger urban, social and discursive world in which they were founded, a world in which a range of motives jostled for attention, all rooted in a particular conception of an urban industrial civic order. It is hardly surprising that most data was not collected with a view to analysing who visitors were, even in London which remained a distinctive case because of its association with nationhood.

According to Meller, the ideals of a liberal cultural consensus that had driven many civic initiatives in later nineteenth-century Bristol, including its museum and art gallery, already seemed anachronistic as the new century got under way. Business elites there steadily ceded cultural leadership to professionals, above all educationalists (Meller, 1976). The early twentieth century saw the more general disintegration of that cohesive liberal vision across British towns. It also saw a decline from high levels of museum-going. Far more important than competition amongst museums themselves, whose visitor numbers were not in any case a zero-sum game, was the rise of other visitor attractions and major new leisure offerings in the form of cinema and professional football. Museum directors worried that it was harder to attract visitors, but it is not clear whether this mattered to local or national elites. Only in recent decades have the numbers and profile of visitors become key drivers of policy and of the demands made of museums. Detailed numbers in the past did not carry the resonance they do today.

What about the objectives of museums themselves? Imperatives change over time but the curation and conservation of collections were often in tension with visitor numbers. This was particularly an issue for the major London museums, something starkly evident in parliamentary inquiries into the best location for the National Gallery, constrained by its then very small Trafalgar Square site where dirt and pollution threatened the condition of the paintings. In 1857 the National Gallery Site Commission even sent one of its number, no less a scientist than Michael Faraday, to the British Museum to determine the effects of ‘smoke, dust and atmospheric influences’ on the sculptures there. The deterioration of the collection through dirt brought in on the clothing of visitors was a continuing theme of the Commission as it considered an alternative site at Kensington Gore.

When John Coleridge, a judge and Liberal politician, wrote to the Commission he set out a very personal position but in doing so highlighted an issue that has remained pertinent ever since. Accessibility of ordinary people to the collections of the National Gallery could not be constrained in order to protect the collection, he argued, for what was the collection for?

… [I]f it were demonstrable that the pictures in their present position must absolutely perish sooner than at Kensington, I conceive this would conclude nothing. The existence of the pictures is not the end of the collection, but the means only to give the people an ennobling enjoyment; to purify their tastes, and wean them from polluting and debasing habits. If while so employed a great picture ‘perished in the using’, if every earnest spectator literally carried off some portion of its freshness and beauty, and in effect transferred it to his own mind, it could not be said that the pictures had not fulfilled the best purpose of the purchase, or that it had been lost in its results to the nation. (National Gallery Site Commission, 1857, p. 167)

This mid-Victorian Liberal formulation is of its moment, but the conflicting priorities of custodianship for the future and access in the present engage all who manage collections today. Museums became custodians of artefacts and also of the knowledge bound up in them, as curatorial practice was professionalised in the first half of the twentieth century. Many museums came to focus introspectively on the conservation, study and interpretation of their collections. In recent decades, however, as visitor numbers have become the key policy and financial objective, the relationship between museum, audience and collection has become more problematic. Museums today respond to a variety of imperatives that include the growth and care of their collection, financial sustainability, new knowledge in their field, and participation and civic responsibility.[[2]](#endnote-2) These constitute a challenging mix, the product of a particular and relatively recent moment in the configuration of what museums are about.

The role of the collection in all of this has become more ambiguous, yet for most larger museums it is an issue that is very much present. It was perhaps less evident in the nineteenth century where the National Gallery and British Museum were the exception in being built from the outset around serious collections. Other museums built their collections in diverse ways and some saw temporary displays and exhibitions, often supported by loans from the South Kensington Museum (now V&A), as a pragmatic way to maintain interest. Permanent collections might come from taking over those of other bodies, as when Leeds Council acquired the collection of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society assembled by donations from elite members as ‘a celebration of wealth, of travel, of the anxiety to possess, control and understand creation’ (Morris, 1980, p. 214). How else does one explain the presence of an Egyptian mummy that had been purchased in Trieste by a Leeds banker? Most provincial museums opened with limited collections and tiny acquisition budgets, with Manchester and Birmingham unusual in having resources from municipality and private donors to purchase works. Others muddled through with loans and gifts from local residents, with the result that displays with a curated purpose were not always clear (Waterfield, 2015).

The new Walsall Art Gallery & Museum accumulated its opening display from those willing to lend. The metal work, textiles and antique musical instruments temporarily borrowed from South Kensington were augmented by haphazard local loans. There were glass cases with ‘the collection of New Guinea curiosities lent by Mr Dauncey’, obtained by a member of his family working as a missionary there; beautiful fossils lent by Mr A Burt; ‘curiosities given to the town …by the Rev Harry Scott’; medals and coins from the Free Library; a fine collection of birds eggs lent by Mr A Price; sculptures lent by Mr FJ Williamson of Esher, including the original model for his Jubilee Bust of Queen Victoria; and some 120 pictures lent by local worthies (*Walsall Observer*, 1892).

Notwithstanding how their collections took shape, there was an enthusiasm for museums in the later nineteenth century that was rooted in a particular historical context. The setting for cultural policy and investment today is very different, one without the kind of agendas by which confident urban (or indeed national) elites drove the establishment of these museums in the first place. New Labour’s cultural policy was the culmination of a process by which museums had once again moved attention away from acquiring, preserving and interpreting their collections and back towards a strong emphasis on people and audiences. Early in the process, Selwood highlighted this major shift in what museums were seen to be about (Selwood, 2004). The consequence was a new emphasis on the impact museums could be shown to deliver.

Over the last 20 years the argument for museums has assumed a scattergun approach: economic impact, tourism, health and wellbeing, social inclusion and much else. What is missing is a coherent articulation of why and how museums exist into which a discourse about their visitors might be fitted. Who comes and in what numbers did matter to museums in the nineteenth century, but far more attention was given to the personal, educational and moral benefits of visiting a museum than is the case today. These beliefs may have been sustained though rhetoric rather than evidence, but they were strongly held. The context of the last 20 years is very different, with the numbers and profile of visitors more important in policy and other discourses than the character of their experiences. This neglect of experience is a wider problem in cultural policy (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). The nineteenth-century language of improvement derived from a specific historical context and a particular framework of class relations, but there was a confident belief in the difference engaging with museums would make.

By placing visitor numbers and profile at the centre of policy we have lost that. Numbers are collected and diversity sought not for some larger purpose but to signal the value for taxpayers’ money and to overcome any injustice in who is subsidising whom. These are important issues, but they are approached in a setting where the dominant discourse about why museums matter has lost its coherence. As I noted above, the purpose for which data is collected is crucial for shaping the questions and therefore the answers. An analysis of seven Danish cultural participation surveys between 1964 and 2012 illustrates this well. The meanings of both culture and participants shifted over the period as the wider political and social environment changed. Where participants had once been surveyed primarily as citizens, with governments interested in how they spent their expanding leisure time, they came to be seen from the 1990s as customers. The legitimacy of publicly-funded cultural institutions in Denmark now rested on the extent to which consumers made use of them (Balling & Kann-Christensen, 2013). The deficit model, with its concept of barriers to participation in a particular kind of publicly-funded culture, came to prevail in ways parallel to Britain. These changing Danish surveys provide a powerful example of how the context in which data is collected is fundamental to its meaning.

Democratising access to museums is the core driver in a way that it wasn’t in the nineteenth century, and data is gathered on numbers attending and their demographic profile with little interest in the character or meanings of their experience. Seeking an association between museum attendance and subjective wellbeing does not constitute that. There are other perspectives, however, which recover the museum as part of the wider public realm, albeit in ways very different from the late nineteenth century. Museums today are a part of the civic space with cafes, retailing, educational activities and so on, put there by the quest for financial sustainability, relevance and engagement. As the spaces of the city become privatised, so the museum refashions itself as part of the public realm, with implications for its role in public and participatory arts. This is far from a narrow focus on visitor numbers and profile and has the potential to shape a more coherent and challenging vision for the purpose of the museum today. I return to my key point – in the second half of the nineteenth century those who established museums had a relatively clear sense both of their purpose and of how they fitted into the wider public sphere. The narrative today is less coherent and much more fragmented.

The relationship between audiences and collections has in recent years been taking on new forms as many museums seek a more participatory and dynamic engagement. The Gulbenkian Foundation’s inquiry into the civic role of culture distinguishes between access, participation and co-design (Gulbenkian Foundation, 2017). All three raise key questions and each of them has implications for collections. A variety of new initiatives signal that something different is going on. Some museums are claiming to constitute critical alternative spaces for collaboration and engagement as Queen’s Museum, in New York’s borough with the most disadvantaged immigrant districts, did under Tom Finkelpearl’s leadership, constructing an interactive collection in new ways. Derby Museum’s Object Walks programme takes items in its collection to the community beyond its walls, as when a West African headrest spent several days on the counter of a local florist, prompting different kinds of conversation with customers.

The nineteenth-century founders of museums were confident of what they should contain, in terms of artefacts and their origin, their confidence born in their own social and intellectual authority. Yet collections exclude as well as include, and marginalised groups now focus on this exclusion to assert their identity and seek recognition in the public sphere. We see this in the campaigns to reconfigure how collections are constituted and presented through different prisms of sexuality or ethnicity, the work of traveller communities in Britain to give substance and coherence to their cultural materials (Belfiore, 2014 & forthcoming), or the campaign in countries with indigenous peoples for recognition through the medium of archives and collections. An exhibition I visited at Rio Art Museum saw people of indigenous origin collecting documents, stories and videos as part of a campaign for an Indigenous Cultural Centre. Museums are fundamental to identity and recognition, and in that context collections become a contested area.

Initiatives such as these show how the conception and practice surrounding collections can become part of a dialogue with audiences. Collections and audiences have indeed always gone together. We thus return to the way visitors and collections are embedded in how museums have emerged and what has been expected of them. Once placed in their historical contexts, similarities can be understood through an appreciation of difference. By bringing together the changing contexts in which museums, audiences and collections have been configured and debated, we can better understand what is going on at different historic times. Including the historic time in which we now live. For a historian who has in more recent years come to think a good deal about culture, its value and its institutional practice, that is a reassuring conclusion.

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1. I’m grateful to Peter Jenkinson for drawing my attention to this report. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I’m grateful to Emily Pringle, Tate, for a helpful discussion of these issues. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)