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The Reshaping Role of Western Museums in the Context of Public Engagement

Xingjian Zhang

School of History, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom
chriszxj050112@163.com

Abstract. Western museums have long been regarded as carriers and symbols of knowledge and national identity, and they are also entrusted with greater expectations in nowadays. With the societal trends toward democratization, diversity, and inclusivity, Western museums are undergoing a significant and profound transformation. This transformation has compelled museums to redefine the relationship between cultural institutions and the public within the context of public engagement. This essay primarily employs literature analysis and case studies to examine the reasons behind the transformation of Western museums, the changes brought about by this transformation, and critically analyze its successes and limitations. This research indicates that while Western museums are transitioning from collection-centered cultural institutions to participatory public spaces, this transformation resembles an "ongoing process of negotiation" rather than genuine democratization. To some extent, it indirectly reveals the persistent tension between the authority of cultural institutions and the public.

Keywords: Public Engagement, Museum Studies, Decolonization, Democracy

1. Introduction

Museums have always served as repositories of a nation's culture and identity, and Western museums are no exception. In the traditional sense of social roles, museums primarily function as authoritative institutions, collectors, and educators [1]. However, with the overall progress and development of society, the traditional role of museums has also changed. To a certain extent, the advent of the digital age has also driven the public engagement of museums within society [2]. But this also challenges its traditional role, reshaping the museum's role in the nation and society. Therefore, this essay will employ literature analysis and case studies to examine the transformation of Western museums, the relationship between their post-transformation roles and public engagement, and the potential challenges they may encounter. The significance of studying museum transformation in the context of public engagement is that with societal and technological advancements, museums no longer serve merely as authoritative custodians of collections or educators. Instead, they increasingly strengthen public participation and function as a carrier for diverse ethnic identities and cultural recognition. This essay offers critical reflections on international museum research within a broader context.

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2. The traditional role of museum

2.1. Functions and features

The role of museums in the traditional sense is multifaceted. First, museums are regarded as embodiments of national power, identity, and cultural context, primarily manifested through the collection and display of “national heritage” to reinforce the nation's collective sense of identity [3]. Museums often serve as vital bridges for negotiating and constructing national identity. By analyzing history and artifacts, they intensify public ideology, and shape individuals' and nations' sense of identity. Additionally, the role of traditional museums also served as a microcosm of the social elite class at that time [4]. This was largely because the artworks or artifacts in museums at the time originated from royal families and wealthy elites, aiming to emphasize the discerning taste for art and the unique cultural sensibilities of the social elite. However, this microcosm of the museum also reflected the class stratification issues facing society at the time. Meanwhile, the educational role of museums is also one of the important roles that cannot be ignored [5]. This educational role persists to nowadays, it challenged the traditional concept of the educator. It enables the integration of diverse cultures, histories, and sciences, thereby enhancing the inclusive nature of education.

2.2. The opportunity of transformation

For the transformation of museums, the factors to be considered may include advancements in social and technological standards, the diversification of cultural backgrounds, and immigration issues [6]. The overall advancement of social technology represents a crucial factor in museum transformation. Leveraging technological progress not only enhances museum accessibility but also elevates public outreach. Moreover, technological advancements have enhanced the creativity and interactivity of museums. In the context of public engagement, visitors have gradually shifted from merely 'observing’ to actively 'participating and practicing’, reflecting a multifaceted understanding of history. Cultural backgrounds and immigration issues, by integrating diverse value systems and beliefs, transform museums from institutions centered on a specific subject into more inclusive venues for cultural exchange—though this transition may still present certain risks and challenges.

3. Reshaping the role of museum

3.1. Identity and cultural differences

Traditionally, museums have often been single-identity narratives, and this singular identity narrative does indeed ensure consistency with mainstream cultural narratives. However, this identity ignores the diversity within the nation and society extently, leading to the exclusion of cultural diversity and the marginalization of minority groups [7]. It is worth noting that this exclusion of cultural diversity and the marginalization of minority groups and their histories inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and even lead to misunderstandings and distortions of history. This may include neglect of racial and cultural identities, leading to increased social tensions. The foundation of this singular identity narrative rests upon the definition of 'difference’. Therefore, rethinking the role of museums requires a renewed acknowledgment and negotiation of these alleged 'differences’. Within the traditional context of museums, 'difference’ often exists as an objectified phenomenon. For instance, the display of colonial artifacts, where minority ethnic groups and immigrants become the subjects of differentiation. Therefore, acknowledging and shaping cultural diversity and the

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distinct identities of minority groups through cultural exchange can help museums reduce 'difference' [8]. Mutual respect and understanding help foster shared narratives across diverse cultural backgrounds, and this inclusive perspective also effectively reduces the number of subjects marginalized by differences. In other words, the subject of difference is no longer suppressed or merely displayed, but rather a shared narrative of diversity. Museums can also effectively reflect the complexly interwoven history within society, enriching shared narratives through public engagement.

3.2. The new role of public engagement

In the context of modern museums, public engagement has become their primary space within society. The role of museums has gradually evolved into that of a venue for dialogue on social diversity, endowing them with significant social relevance. In this way, museums cease to be unquestionable authorities and instead become collaborative spaces for diverse exchanges. Meanwhile, the rise of digital technology and social media has democratized museum participation, enabling challenges to authoritative institutions [9]. Thus, within the context of public engagement, museums have begun to function as 'community creators'. This transformation has not only mitigated certain differences extently but also enabled the collaborative construction of public discourse. Museums operating within a context of public engagement not only democratize access to culture and history but also strengthen the cohesion of the nation and society as a whole. This transforms museums from passive repositories of heritage into active participants in public life. However, while this transformed role offers advantages, it also faces challenges.

4. Case studies

4.1. Tate Modern Museum

Tate Morden Museum serves as an excellent case study, demonstrating the success of Western museums in redefining their roles within the context of public engagement, largely resolving the issue of museum differentiation. Traditional museums have always maintained close connections with the elite class, where visitors often assume the role of learners in addition to being spectators. Tate Morden Museum's Tate Exchange initiative, launched in 2016, repositioned the museum as a dynamic, collaborative social space [10]. This project directly answers questions about the identity and cultural differentiation of Western museums. Public engagement is embodied through fostering dialogue and engagement, emphasizing a shared creative experience for the public as a diverse community interaction project that transcends traditional appreciation [11]. In other words, Tate Exchange transforms differences in identity and culture into a highly inclusive public space for dialogue. In short, the Tate Exchange program invites participation from all members of the public, from mainstream voices to those of marginalized groups. It underscores the significance of public co-creation. In this democracy, differences are effectively resolved, and the diversity within the nation and society is not erased but transformed into an interactive space for public deliberation and dialogue. Notably, case studies demonstrate that the future focus of museums extends beyond serving as repositories for cultural heritage. The significance of these highly participatory and inclusive spaces for dialogue lies not in achieving uniformity, but in preserving diversity—ensuring that more overlooked voices can be heard once again.

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4.2. The British Museum

For the British Museum, it is inherently a museum with a high degree of public engagement. As a museum open to the global public, the artifacts within its collection are also diverse. Therefore, this also renders the challenges faced by the British Museum in reshaping its role within the context of public engagement impossible to ignore. The historical connections between the British Museum and imperialism and colonialism are complex. The museum's refusal to return artifacts acquired during the imperial era demonstrates that it remains entrenched in colonial thinking rather than serving as a genuine space for collaborative dialogue [12]. In short, this form of public engagement remains superficial, failing to penetrate the core power structures and thus unable to achieve genuine transformation. It is more akin to a process of negotiation than true democracy. Under this colonial mindset, the authority to speak for or interpret cultural relics remains firmly in the hands of official institutions, while alleged public engagement is confined within strictly controlled parameters. In other words, museums have consistently failed to establish genuine trust with the public, particularly with marginalized racial groups and formerly colonized nations. Despite the British Museum's extensive attempts at transformation within the context of public engagement, genuine decolonization requires a redistribution of power. Its museum remains caught between openness and control, with transformation manifesting only partially. A tense dynamic persists between alleged inclusivity and authority. Therefore, true transformation requires not only new creativity but also a reinterpretation of the relationship between museums and cultural identity differences.

5. Conclusion

This essay explores the transformation of Western museums from “authoritative interpreters of knowledge” into “diverse and inclusive forums for collaborative dialogue and social connection” through public engagement. Specifically, this study primarily examines Tate Modern Museum and The British Museum as case studies, analyzing how identity differentiation is addressed during role transformation and the challenges that remain. To a certain extent, it reveals the potential for democratization of cultural identity within the context of public engagement, while simultaneously exposing the negative aspects of power transformation. Furthermore, this essay could adopt a more specific and in-depth perspective in its case analysis. Case studies have only examined the success and challenges of museum transformation from a macro perspective, while it is equally possible to discuss the benefits and issues encountered during the transformation process from the visitor's perspective. This essay offers broad reflections on public engagement in international museums. Future research could further explore digital democracy in museums undergoing transformation or during the transition process, achieving a redistribution of power within a postcolonial context.

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