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Material Sensescapes, Sensory Mentality

Museums as Empires of Sight

Museums as 'odd and inaccessible places ... that neither partake in life, nor in which life partakes' are products of Western modernity that postdate earlier Wunderkammern and cabinets of curiosities that enabled a sense of wonder through a full, active, sensory engagement with objects. Museums' privileging of the visual does not allow the viewer to replicate their real-life, synchronous and direct use of several senses in engagements with the physical world of which they are a part.

The museum as 'empire(s) of sight' has always been a 'sensescape,' 'objects colonized by the gaze.' Museums as empires of sight evoke a sense of 'learning, wonder, reflection and relaxation, sensory stimulation, conversations with friends, new social ties, creation of lasting memories, or recollection of past events.' At the root of display convention and museum curation, whether intentional or not, lies the sensation of the body as it moves through a space, becoming part of the whole museum experience, fabricating 'a multi-layered journey that is proprioceptive, sensory, intellectual, aesthetic and social.' In a similar vein to the ontological and material turn, the sensory turn took effect within the museum world and began to acknowledge the multiplicity of our experiential world. The above critique of museums alludes to the deified and fractured relationship between materiality and the senses; which thereby ensues a level of interactivity between viewer and viewed. Likened to cemeteries, and a 'meditative necropolis', modern museums are places dedicated to 'indefinitely accumulating time,' and expressions of 'the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages.' These qualities and discourse around sensory-museology draw heavily from neuroscience; the way that our brain receives, processes and transmits information, museums hold the potential to shape our brains. For the purposes of this inquiry, I will explore the sensory consumption of material culture within museums and evaluate how we can

better understand the ways in which the 'senses are ordered by and underpin all cultures with sensory models shaping lives.' While the attitude towards, and deification of, museums as empires of sight has rapidly become antiquated, museums – their collectors, benefactors, and underlying ideologies – are facing their colonial crimes at a higher rate than ever before. Museums are responding to this through repatriation, deaccessioning, tactile exhibitions, creative play and by redefining interaction within these spaces. Are museums inherently trapped by their legacy as empires of sight or do they hold the potential to be vessels for creating material sensescapes for the future?

Much of academic thought surrounding materiality took place during the material turn – a cultural mindset reflecting a subjective perspective that would garner an inextricable link between museum collections, colonialism and collected artefacts of the 'other'.

While the senses are the means by which the human body perceives and responds to the material world, the critical nexus they form around material culture has yet to be adequately described and, following on from that, its impact for museological practices assessed.

The nature of collecting invokes sensory sensibility, visual aesthetics, ethnographic interpretations of cultural and spiritual significance and the act of display; 'the ban on touch has been rationalised as a measure to protect the(se) collections from harm.' Sensory restraint contributes to the participant experience of marvel and wonder; the boundaries defined by the museum impact on the experience of the visitor. Classen explores the ways this custom has morphed since the original museum experience, with a specific focus on the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Various first-hand accounts from visitors during the nineteenth century prove that exhibits were 'hands on' implying that participants were able to interact physically, offering the chance for corporeal engagements with and consumption of materiality. This approach diminishes the chances of objectification, the sensory engagement creating 'physical and emotional connections with other people and places.' The subsequent shift away from tactile engagement and towards didactic observation, comes in large part down to a Western understanding of the senses and of sensibility which has informed display convention and 'continues to control

even exhibitions whose intentions are to decentre Western hierarchies.’ Sociological and class factors had significant influence over the rationalisation of conservation theory, which was to minimise touch and implement glass cabinets; class, gender and race divisions each quantified by White educated men, to determine who was worthy of handling exhibits. Losche identifies two different understandings of ‘the sensory Imaginary’ in museums to better articulate these interpretations of display; the first being a Foucauldian interpretation, separating the observer from the observed through manipulation of sense, and utilising sense to dictate behaviour. The other, viewing sensory experience as immersive and alluding to the concept of ‘sensescapes’. Display behind glass cabinets aims to create a neutral ground allowing the object to speaking for itself and to be open to interpretation. While the rationale behind this approach has shifted, its critique, and the one with which this essay aligns, argues that where one sense, ‘the privileging of the visual,’ is heightened, the rest become muted.

The museum is not a neutral player; ‘pressures on museums to widen audiences and provide increased access to their collections have underlined the importance of touch and handling as a form of access to museum collections’ and identity. The hermeneutics of display, namely regional groupings, dioramas and typological displays, are detrimental to the acknowledgement and understanding, and misrepresent the human experience of marginalised groups. Display convention such as glass cabinets and didactic, monolingual labels encourage the sensibility of sober and reverential pensiveness towards objects among participants at the museum. Because the most “visually-striking” artefacts are displayed for their impact, cultural, ritual and symbolic content or relevance are ignored by an artificially chosen context. With such a heavily purveyed ocular-centric input of display, visual sensory experience in the museum is now defined by these themes, incentivising ‘vision itself [sic] to be reconceptualised as integral to other sensory modalities’ rather than the sole representation of them. In recent decades, there has been an increasing awareness of how the senses expand, extend and rebalance extant ways of thinking about material culture in varying contexts and spaces. Largely informed by cognitive research science, sensory ethnography and

revisionist history, academic material suggests that this dynamic is paramount to the public consumption of arts and culture. Thus ‘renew[ing] interest in the social history of art and in the creation of the far more inclusive field of objects and images that makes up the interdisciplinary of visual studies.’ While the first shift towards tactile engagement was initiated in children’s and science museums, reflecting a need for a point of difference during the twentieth century, they still remained in the realm of “marvel and wonder.” The anthropology of the senses has been extended by scholars into a deeper analysis of ‘cultural and sensory transfigurations which indigenous artifacts undergo upon accession into Western museums.’ This has allowed for further inquiry into the material senses of museums. However, this approach is still rooted in Eurocentric academic discipline,

despite the inclusive nature of the approach and democratization of hierarchies of art that had been governed by gendered, racist, and classist assumptions there is nonetheless a tendency to subsume the multisensory facets of complex artworks, compressing aspects of performance and ritual that are auditory, kinetic, or olfactory.’

The concept of “affordances,” pertaining to the possible actions that people can take when perceiving an object sensually, has been appropriately adapted to this discourse; Gadoua considers ‘the affordances of the object – the actions that the object can *and* does allow people to undertake with it – to be generative of its meanings.’ The most canonical changes in sensory mentality have come from BIPOC and source communities’ advocacy – whose understanding of material culture is not synonymous with labelling and categorisation. This protest for repatriation and increased, transparent access and (re)connection to respective collections housed elsewhere, requires the admission of wrongdoing and the taking of reparative steps by heritage institutions.

The meanings residing in and carried by objects are manipulated when displayed, their meaning, status and sense altered and diluted for convenience of access, exposure, context of received opinion and overlooked benefit of communication with informants in translating and interpreting true significance. Working with materials and the power of touch allows a greater understanding and discovery of

their meaning – in large part, collections are made up of objects initially intended for utilitarian, practical, ritual or symbolic purposes. Three particular case studies within established Western museum institutions that bring to light these sensory transfigurations are; the Sultanganj 'Buddha Day' at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery 2008; the Handling with Inuit Elders at the McCord Museum and the exhibition 'African Worlds' at the Horniman Museum in South London. Golding explores 'African Worlds' and the attached public programme 'Inspiration Africa!,' during 1999, which actively sought to counteract the dehumanisation and othering of African peoples within museological practice and display convention. Through observation of this exhibit we gain a deeper understanding of 'embodied engagement with objects regarded as art'. Objects in this collection were from sub-Saharan communities, the main focus of the exhibit was to exercise the creativity of children. Creative play (such as the handling of a small Shona headrest and an Ashanti stool), group activities, audio-visual, theatrical cues and elements to accompany the exhibit, fostered a learning space that saw great success among the experience of young participants. The headrest in particular, understood to prompt dreams and encourage imagination, particularly resonated with autistic pupils who felt 'self-affirmed and self-transcended' in their interactions.

In 2008, during Vesakh, a festival in commemoration of the birth, enlightenment, and death of Gautama Buddha in Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism and Navayana, an event was held at the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in collaboration with a Burmese Monastery, Ottara Nyana. Visitors from across the area flocked to pay tribute to the most valuable object of the museum collection, the Sultanganj Buddha, most of whom engaged with in a religious capacity, 'blessing and chanting' the sacred figure. Wingfield unpacks this interaction as the introduction of charisma into the interpretivist interaction between viewer and viewed, or a Western view of the subject-object binary. This notion opposes an objectification and distancing of the (representation of) the deity, and imbues the Buddha with human spirit and familial connection. This brief yet powerful moment of contact between the Sultanganj Buddha and attendees, illuminates the role the museum plays in conditioning sensory interaction with its audience to understand the anthropomorphic, charismatic and 'human perceptual experience of the world.'

In a similar vein to projects at the Horniman and Birmingham Art Gallery, community engagement at the McCord Museum in Montreal with Inuit Elders has altered the sensory perception of objects among visitors and staff. A series of workshops held in a conference room fostered a 'process of recalling, narrating, and re-enacting memories associated with the objects, and how these encounters generate meanings for the collections.' The comprehension and assessment of objects by descendants increased greatly through tactile engagement, the information from which usurped any proprietorial claims that archaeologists, historians and conservators had made prior to the encounter. It is worth noting that direct contact, without gloves, was pivotal in this meaning-making process, as it allowed participants to engage in full, active, sensory engagement with objects. In these instances, tactile handling has healing properties to both the people and the objects, as an aspect of caring for objects and for others, which is beginning to be recognised among conservation practitioners.

A 'mimetic' relationship to the world is a phenomenon explored by Walter Benjamin whereby 'both our understanding of the experiential and epistemological relation to reality, and, not least, the understanding of our place and our belonging in the world go back to a mimetic premise.' Mimesis, interpretation and fabrications of reality are phenomena that predate multi-sensory display at the Ashmolean, museums, and the academy altogether. The human condition has always been synonymous with materiality. At the forefront of activism in museum spaces, is the connection to communities whose human condition has been undermined, overlooked and sidelined by settler colonialism;

the contemporary revalorization of touch in the museum has otherwise derived some impetus from requests by indigenous communities to either regain possession of or have hands-on access to their ancestral artifacts owned by museums.

This influenced technological development in the museum-sector such as haptic interfaces, 3-D imagery, stimulated touch that offers visitors the chance 'to "feel" three-dimensional works of art (and artefacts) without physically touching them.' This has co-opted effective participation though can also maintain "sensationalism" by way of determining the visitor experience. In order for material sensescapes to

be effective, they need to be *open* to interpretation from the beginning. Curatorship, to some degree designed to dictate the visitor experience, can transfer power to source communities by remaining open to multiple narratives and definitions of its role. Gadoua adequately assigned senses to the ‘political, ideological, and social levels’ of the power dynamic between coloniser and colonised amidst the journey towards decolonisation. Whilst the introduction of audio, visual and tactile elements into museums has added to the overall participant experience, many marginalised community groups experience the opposite, on account of this dynamic. The constructed convention and engagement with material culture that BIPOC communities encounter, but are not accustomed to, in a museum space, may mean they also feel excluded if the didactic, coded audio-visual information is alien to respective ways of knowing and being with (their own) material culture. Equally, neurodiverse, Deaf and blind communities and people with disabilities can feel as distanced from the carefully created-by-the-abled world inside the museum as in the outside world. Not all communities will necessarily relate to or understand the context of the audio-visual, olfactory or tactile prompts, considering that ‘the dynamic web of sensuous and social meaning is broken when an artifact is moved from its cultural settings and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum.’ By examining how the presence of a community-led initiative fosters connection, in contrast to that of a remote ‘expert’, the question arises, does the power of absence mean the absence of power?

Material sensescapes and sensory mentality exacerbate intercultural understanding. By observing the various ways people consume material culture differently, we see instances where ‘humanity [is] seen to communicate with humanity.’ Each of the case studies, all in spaces with inherited ‘privileging of the visual’ *modus operandi*, delineate the viewer versus viewed, subject versus object dichotomy. There is an overwhelming amount of untapped potential that lies within international collections for source communities to have hands-on engagement, not only to broaden the understanding of meaning-making but to ‘evoke memories, open new worlds and enrich learning.’ To achieve this wholly would require a (re)visioning – deep, hard decolonial work by museum staff and ultimately, listening to the voices and

experiences of BIPOC and source communities. How to then translate what is learnt from these conversations into a museum space is the next challenge. Can boundaries defined by the museum be dismantled for as long as the museum as we know it exists? If the museum as an 'empire of sight' has codified itself as such, can we then reframe museums beyond a homogenic conceptualisation of sight equating to 'visual' modality and into a future which partakes in life, and in which life partakes?

Settler colonialism is built upon an entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave, the decolonial desires of white, non-white, immigrant, postcolonial, and oppressed people, can similarly be entangled in resettlement, reoccupation, and rein habitation that actually further settler colonialism.

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

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