HERITAGE: THE POLITICAL AND THE PERSONAL

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Many wise academics have written many great books about heritage. They discuss what heritage is, how it is defined and what it means.

In this article I do not intend to offer an erudite, scholarly analysis of heritage. Instead, I am going to make some comments, based on over ten years that I have spent observing the museum and gallery scene in the UK, first as editor of Museums Journal and more recently as deputy director of the Museums Association.

My main theme is the question of who defines heritage. It will give some examples of what politicians and governments say about heritage and it will compare this with how individuals view heritage. Who defines heritage: the museums or the people? This, then, is the question I am seeking to answer. After that I will consider what museums can do and the part they should play in shaping and creating heritage.

HERITAGE NOW

It is easy to use the word 'heritage' without thinking enough about what it really means. The first thing to observe about heritage is that it exists NOW. Heritage is shaped and defined by today's individuals and institutions. It is not something fixed and 'out there' in the past waiting to be discovered. Instead it is something that is created by people's actions and ideas. In this sense heritage could be defined as the creative and imaginative use of the past by the present. I am not going to discuss this in further detail, but it is an idea that will underpin all that I say. (For a fuller discussion see Lowenthal 1997.)

For my purposes in this article it is useful to identify two types of heritage: official heritage and personal heritage. Official heritage is heritage as defined by governments, politicians and state institutions. Reading government documents, it is possible to identify three categories of official heritage: (1) European Heritage, (2) National Heritage and (3) Local Heritage.

EUROPEAN HERITAGE

In recent years we have heard much about European Heritage. The main creators of this concept are the various institutions of European government, particularly the European Union. One of the aims of the

36 EU is to create Europe. Along with inventing a single European currency and a single European market, inventing the idea of European Heritage is part of this.

A key way in which the European Union tries to create European Heritage is by spending money on it. We in museums are, of course, grateful for this source of funding and perhaps do not worry too much about the political messages that museums create so that their projects will meet the rules of European funding schemes.

Consider, for example, the Raphael programme. For several years this gave money to support projects that: 'highlight common cultural features and transnational currents that have contributed to the emergence of a common cultural heritage.' In discussing the Raphael scheme, the EU talks of 'the European cultural heritage' (Official Journal 1998) and, on the application form, 'our heritage' (Raphael 1999). Underlying the Raphael scheme there is a fundamental assumption that there is a common cultural heritage in Europe.

Some years ago, it seemed that European Heritage was being seen as those aspects of heritage that can be traced back to Ancient Greece and Rome. But these have no relevance to many of the people in Europe. Europe is a large and diverse place. A common cultural heritage capable of including everyone in Europe would need to embrace the Sami people in Lapland and Sicilians; small-scale farmers in Ireland and industrialists in Germany.

Of course there is a common cultural heritage that links all these people: the Sami people, Sicilians, the small-scale farmers in Ireland and the industrialists in

Germany. At a spiritual level it is that they are all human and share human emotions and life experiences like birth, maturity and death. But none of these experiences are especially European – indeed they are features of all of humanity, throughout the whole world.

At another level a cultural link across Europe is that we all drink Coca Cola, watch MTV and give our children Disney toys.

If a museum wants to collect items that can represent European heritage to future generations should it collect items to represent these things?

There is just one problem in defining European culture using these things: they all, of course, originate in America and are manifestations of a world heritage.

If you read the guidance for the Raphael funding scheme closely, some doubts about the viability of 'common European cultural heritage' can be found. In places it talks, for example, not of the common cultural heritage, but of 'the European historical and/or artistic context surrounding the heritage concerned' and of 'the immovable heritage in its European dimension'. Note that this is different to saying that the heritage itself is European – rather that the context of it is European, or that it has a European dimension.

If we now look at the Culture 2000 programme which is likely to replace several EU funding schemes, including Raphael, we can see even more doubts appearing. A proposal for Culture 2000 says citizens in Europe have 'common cultural values' rather than a common culture itself. It does then talk of 'the common cultural heritage', but also of 'the cultures of the member states' and 'their national and regional

diversity'. It also mentions the need to 'safeguard the position of Europe's small cultures'. In this the EU appears to be accepting, perhaps reluctantly, that Europe has many cultures (all quotations from Proposal 1998).

We are at a turning point in the definition of European Cultural Heritage. Essentially the European Union still seems to want a 'common' heritage, but is being forced to accept that throughout the history of Europe there has never been any such thing.

Now the situation is even more complex – and the people of Europe have greater diversity than ever before. Indeed, the Culture 2000 proposal acknowledges 'the people of Europe, in all their social, regional and cultural diversity.' (Proposal 1998)

In the UK the term 'cultural diversity' means multi-culturalism and ethnic diversity. It is used to indicate that in the UK there are many different peoples with different outlooks and origins – and that society is enriched by that variety.

BRITISH HERITAGE

Everything I have said about the politically constructed nature of European Heritage is true of concepts of national heritage. I do not intend to look at the subject of national heritage in any detail here as there is extensive literature on the subject; the role of museums in creating national identities is well documented (see, for example, Kaplan 1994). My aim here is only to further illustrate the idea of 'official heritage' and to do this I will look mainly at an example from the UK.

In the UK we have an organisation cal-

led the National Heritage Memorial Fund. This used to be rather unimportant, simply helping museums and other organisations to purchase a small number of works of art, historic buildings and pieces of important land. It did this using a small amount of money given to it each year by the government.

Famously, the chairman said that NHMF decided not to try to define 'the national heritage', but to let it define itself, in terms of the decisions that were made on what to fund. Of course, heritage didn't define itself, the people who made the decisions in the NHMF did the defining. These people were appointed by the government. Some were aristocrats – Lord X and Lady Y. They had a very particular view of what heritage is. For example, it was Italian paintings purchased by British aristocrats in the 18th century while they were on their grand tour. In the 1980s the UK's 'national' heritage was dominated by the rich.

This was perfectly fine with the government of the day. Britain was ruled by a right-wing government from 1979-1997 (18 years!) and this government was keen to define the UK in terms of its previous success and power. It was a backward-looking government that often retreated into the past in order to avoid the problems of the present. The government even created a new ministry – the Department of National Heritage. This department was responsible for not only heritage, but also arts, sport, broadcasting, tourism – perhaps all things that the UK used to be better in the past!

But in 1997 things changed. A new government was elected, run by a political party actually called New Labour. It is less

38 interested in heritage, instead it wants to look to the future. One of the government's aims is to redefine Britain as a modern nation that does not cling to the past. The Department of National Heritage has been renamed. It is now called the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In Britain Heritage is OUT; Culture is IN.

As the renaming of UK government departments suggests, Heritage and Culture are closely related concepts, especially when talking of 'official' heritage – or even 'official' culture – a more dangerous term, I think. I have already noted that the terms 'heritage' and 'culture' are often used interchangeably. They are both connected to identity. Perhaps heritage could be defined as that part of culture that deals with the past. (Perhaps 'cultural heritage' could be defined as the part of heritage that deals with the culture of the past.)

In the UK the last right-wing Prime Minister, John Major, who set up the Department of National Heritage, said that Britain was a nation of 'long shadows on county cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and – as George Orwell said – old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist'.

In contrast, the New Labour government has been much more interested in defining Britain as a new, young nation. Tony Blair, the new prime minister, invited pop stars and fashion designers to official government receptions. When there was an Anglo-French summit in 1997, soon after the new government was elected, it was not held in a country house or historic government building, but high up

in a modern skyscraper, with fashionable furniture and modish food. In a parody of the nationalistic song Rule Britannia, the government's desire for all that was new became known as Cool Britannia.

The rush towards fashion and everything new rather backfired on the government and in 1998 they began to try to balance their love of the new with an appreciation of the old, perhaps better reflecting how British people see things. Throughout late 1998 and early 1999 the newspapers were full of discussions about Britishness. As an example, from an article in the Guardian (Guardian 1999), here some of the things people selected to symbolise Britishness:

– *Middle-aged men with their trousers rolled up paddling at Ramsgate [an old-fashioned seaside resort] (according to Julian Critchley, a former Member of Parliament)*

– *Fashion designers like Rifat Ozbek and John Galliano (according to Lisa l'Anson, a radio DJ)*

– *The song of the thrush [a bird], which we have lost completely, along with so many British things (according to Carla Lane, a writer and animal rights activist)*

– *When I was a child it was Winston Churchill, Beefeaters [the soldiers in the Tower of London] and the British Empire BUT Now it is an irrelevant concept (according to Jon Snow, a broadcaster and news reader)*

A key comment was made by John Humphrys, a broadcaster, who observed: 'You simply cannot apply global definitions to an entire society, for the obvious reason that we're all different.'

DANISH HERITAGE

There is no single British identity. But is this true of other countries? I asked people to imagine that they were preparing a museum display or guide book about Denmark in the 20th century and needed to select one single thing for the advertising poster or book cover.

Here are some of the suggestions made:

- *Carlsberg.*
- *«Bakken» (a popular Danish amusement park founded 1583 north of Copenhagen).*
- *«Roligans» (the friendly Danish football supporters) walking across the new bridge to Sweden.*
- *The Queen opening the bridge across Storebælt.*
- *A Danish bacon pig.*
- *The morning meeting in a kindergarten, with the children planning the day's activities.*

Do any of these properly encapsulate Danish heritage?

ENGLISH HERITAGE

The United Kingdom consists of four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. At the moment all of the countries – except England – are getting their own government. Scotland has gone the furthest and now has its own Parliament which will make its own laws and raise some of its own taxes. Before this it already had separate legal and education systems.

In Scotland, national heritage means Scottish heritage, but in England we really don't know if 'national' heritage is English heritage – or whether it is British heritage, also including Scotland, Wales and

Northern Ireland. Needless to say, as well as discussions of Britishness, we have many discussions of Englishness (Paxman 1998 is a good overview; also see Barnes 1998). It seems likely that over the next decade or so there will be more interest in Englishness (and Scottishness and Welshness), and less interest in Britishness. Official bodies that cover more than one country in the UK may well be split up into several separate organisations.

Official definitions of national heritage are in a muddle. For example, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, as I have said, includes all four countries. But we also have the National Trust – an odd sort of public/private organisation that owns much land and many country houses – and some museums. The National Trust covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland – but not Scotland, which has its own National Trust for Scotland. We also have English Heritage, which is a government body that owns castles, archaeological sites, some other country houses and some museums. English Heritage (as you can tell from its name) only covers England. In Scotland there is an organisation called Historic Scotland and in Wales there is a body called CADW. In Northern Ireland they have to make do with the government Department of the Environment, until new bodies are established, some of which may also cover the Republic of Ireland – an independent nation since 1922.

Definitions of Europe are equally confused. The European Union includes Ireland, but not Switzerland. Other European bodies such as the Council of Europe cover a different pattern of states – soon the EU itself might include parts of

40 Eastern Europe; one day it might include Turkey.

One of the rather more ridiculous aspects of the official approach to heritage is that the definitions of heritage usually depend strongly on the clear geographical boundaries of the state, region or local authority.

LOCAL HERITAGE

I want to talk again about the National Heritage Memorial Fund. This organisation was not very important until, in 1995, it was given £250m of lottery money a year to spend on heritage. That's US\$400 million or 2,500,000,000 Danish Kroner. For a few years NHMF carried on in the old way, letting heritage define itself as they approved or rejected applications for heritage lottery money on an individual 'case-by-case' basis. (This also chimed well with the free-market economic approach of the last government.)

But then the new government said that this must change and now NHMF is struggling to be clearer about what it thinks heritage is. One thing that it had to do was to come up with a definition of heritage that applied to the traces left by all types of people – not just the aristocracy. As part of this it now usually calls itself the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Note that, interestingly, it does not call itself the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

In its draft strategic plan HLF proposed to divide heritage into two categories: Centres of Excellence and Local Heritage. Centres of Excellence are described as 'The very best of what the nation has inherited: our great museums, libraries and galleries, our major historic buildings,

our outstanding countryside and the most significant parts of our industrial and maritime past.' (HLF 1998) Note that HLF doesn't specify which 'nation' it is talking about; also note how it talks of 'our' major historic buildings. When official bodies are struggling with concepts of heritage they often use the word 'our' – this is true of the European Union's Raphael funding scheme, too.

In contrast to Centres of Excellence (or national heritage), Local Heritage is described by HLF as follows: 'Every area has inherited something of value which it can enjoy and in which it can take pride. Heritage in this sense is part of every day lives.' (HLF 1998)

This certainly seems an improvement on more usual official definitions of heritage. But there is much further that we should do in defining heritage. In all the concepts of official heritage that I have examined place and geography are the key factors used. A problem with this is that the political boundaries shift and change. However, far more important is the fact that we are now in an age of virtual communities and transnational capitalism, where physical places and national and local state boundaries are decreasing in importance as factors that define people's identity.

PERSONAL HERITAGE

All of us have a heritage of our own. For example, we have our own ancestors. Consider my son. His personal heritage is that he has a Sicilian mother and a father who is half Jewish and half English (or maybe Welsh, no-one in the family is sure!) As a result of his parents he has at least three 'geographical' heritages in him.

But there is more: both his parents – and all his grandparents – spent a large part of their lives in an industrial city (Birmingham) and they go there often, but he is being brought up in a small market-town near to London (St Albans). So there is more geography that complicates the picture.

But, of course, geography is just a tiny part of the factors that have made him how he is. Physically he is made up of the peculiar mix of food he likes – proper Sicilian home-made pasta one day and Burger King the next. (His younger sister prefers Chinese noodles.) His cultural tastes encompass the programmes he watches on TV and the things he reads – increasingly featuring characters created by companies such as Disney for an international market.

So, he is a mixture of many different things – some a result of accidents of parentage and birth, others due to a huge range of influences on him. Only a small part of this can be attributed to European, national or local heritage. There is an extremely strong conceptual difference between the personal heritages created by individual people and the official heritages created by governments or state organisations.

Museums tend to be part of official heritage. Many are run directly by local or national governments. These museums are often about specific, geographically defined places. Others receive regular funding from national, local or European government, and often adapt what they are doing to meet the priorities of the governments that they want to fund them. Museum collections often relate to specific places or areas.

This does not apply to all museums, of course. There are plenty of museums that concern a specific subject rather than a specific place. Natural History Museums often display things from throughout the world. Ethnographic museums clearly show the diversity of groups of people. But even ethnography museums tend to have little to say about individuals – and do little to relate their collections to their visitors' lives. All museums could do more to acknowledge the fact that people sense heritage in a very personal way.

PERSONAL HERITAGE AND MUSEUM MESSAGES

Now, to move to a more practical, less philosophical point. Museum visitors interpret displays in a personal way, whatever museums do.

When my son goes to museums he likes to see, as most small boys do, stuffed animals and old weapons, Egyptian mummies and Roman soldiers, trains and trams, things with buttons to press and, of course, dinosaurs. (And what are dinosaurs – are they his heritage, or modern-day fantasy? Like so much of heritage, dinosaurs surely exist far more strongly in the present than they ever did in the past.) As my son visits the museum his thoughts about the objects and displays are largely determined by what he already knows, and only partly by what the museum wants to tell him. So, he sees the dinosaurs mainly in terms of what he knows from television and his toys – and takes very little from the museum's carefully presented scientific explanations.

This is the case when everyone considers museum displays, unless they are highly

42 trained academics (and I realise that many who work in museums are – but most of our visitors are not). We are most interested in our own origins and history – and we interpret museum displays in our own terms informed by our existing knowledge and experience. As we do so we are busy creating our personal heritages.

If you doubt this, consider what the experts say. A few years ago there was a major international conference at the Science Museum in London about visitor studies (Bicknell and Farmelo, 1993). The main aim of this conference was to introduce the largely American field of Visitor Studies to a UK audience. It was a fascinating event. Speaker after speaker described how they had observed and questioned museum visitors in order to research what they learnt, what they thought and what they liked. There were extensive, complex debates about different academic approaches to evaluation and the scholarly validity of various methodologies. The 'behaviourists' were criticised by the 'cognitives', who were both criticised by the 'socio-cognitives'. Researchers combined techniques from sociology, anthropology and psychology.

As the conference progressed it became clear that no matter how hard museums try to present a certain message, no matter how much they evaluate and change their displays, individual visitors create their own meanings. Audience members produce their own narratives. As David Uzzell wrote in the conference publication:

Research has shown that many visitors are neither highly motivated nor self-directed; they do not read guidebooks, interpretive panels or labels; they pay little attention to guides; and they certainly do not

look at all the exhibits. If there is one consistent message that emerges from exhibition evaluation, it is that visitors do not learn very much. (Bicknell and Farmelo 1993: p125)

In a more recent piece of work, Beverley Serrell analysed data from evaluations of 108 separate exhibitions and concluded:

Visitors typically spend less than 20 minutes in exhibitions regardless of size' and the majority of visitors stop at less than half the exhibits. She concludes: 'The visitor's experience is not made up of what the exhibition offers, but rather it consists of what he or she chooses to attend to. (Serrell 1997)

It would be easy to get depressed about this, concluding that no matter how hard museums try to teach their visitors, the visitors will not take much notice of what the museum says. However, this is a rather negative view of the situation. There is a far more positive way of seeing things: museums can move beyond simplistic official constructions of heritage and identity and create richer versions of heritage together with their visitors.

BRINGING MORE PEOPLE INTO MUSEUMS

To summarise my key points:

- Official, government definitions of heritage are generally unsatisfactory. They often have strong political intentions and are usually limited by geographical boundaries.

- People have their own sense of their own heritage.

- No matter what museums do, people will interpret displays in their own way, for themselves.

Throughout the world museums are being encouraged to share their power and authority with others. In New Zealand, for example, *Te Papa*, the new national museum has twin management structures – one representing the indigenous Maori people, the other representing people of European origin. This replaces a more conventional approach where people of European origin define history and culture (in my terms, they create official heritage). Similar developments are evident in Australia, the USA and Canada. As Moira Simpson says:

Whereas museums were, in the past, perceived as elitist institutions which served a narrow, ethnically defined audience, today many institutions are developing closer working relationships with the communities whose cultures they interpret'. (Simpson 1996: p 247).

She concludes her book:

It is time that museums undertook a re-appraisal of the fundamental philosophies upon which they currently operate, to re-evaluate and refocus their roles in the light of contemporary social thinking, so reflecting in their policies and practices the recognition of other people's world views and rights with regard to the ownership, representation and interpretation of material culture. (Simpson 1996: p 266)

In 1992 the American Association of Museums published a seminal report *Excellence and Equity* in 1992. Some of the recommendations are about museums opening up to a far wider range of types of knowledge and embracing different perspectives. For example:

Enrich our knowledge, understanding and appreciation of collections and of the variety of cultures and ideas they represent and evoke. [---]

Assure that the interpretive process manifests a variety in cultural and intellectual perspectives and reflects an appreciation for the diversity of the museum's public. (AAM 1992)

In the UK, museums are under great political pressure to relate to a wider range of visitors. They need to attract more poor people, more people from minority ethnic communities, more young adults. Museums want to be places of lifelong learning and education. But the answer is not to use ever more sophisticated display techniques to try to teach visitors more effectively about official versions of heritage.

Not only is this kind of heritage intellectually problematical, but as visitor studies research shows, museums simply do not have the power or the ability to do this. If a museum ignores an individual's feelings about heritage, the individual will not take much notice of the museum's views. Even if they bother to study what the museum says (and most people won't), they will read other meanings into it – or simply forget what the museum argued when they get home.

Museums may have power in society in a general sense, in that they guard and give significance to the traces of the past (and so play a part in creating heritage). However, museums have virtually no power at all to influence the views of individual visitors.

In the Visitor Studies in the 1990s conference publication Lisa C Roberts concluded her paper by reminding us that not only visitors construct their own narratives: 'like visitors, curators are engaged in

44 the production of stories'. Now, she notes, we understand that museums are not presenting the whole story, but just one possible version of it. (That is more likely to be the official version of heritage at the expense of all the others.) She continues:

So how does all of this affect the task of interpreting museum collections? Clearly older models of interpretation based on hierarchical, unidirectional modes of communication are no longer adequate. Interpretation is not about teaching visitors. It is about the negotiation of meanings from different worlds.

She talks of 'the mismatch' 'between the museum's culture and the visitor's culture' and says museums need to accept this. In an age of pluralism and relativism museums should teach us 'to see and interpret in myriad ways'. In this, she concludes 'museums can play a role in promoting tolerance, respect and even appreciation of other views.' (Bicknell and Farmelo 1993:pp100-101)

At the very least, museums should move away from monolithic official versions of heritage and present their collections from a variety of viewpoints, bringing in a range of voices and interpretations.

MAKING MUSEUMS PERSONAL

Museums can go further still and incorporate the views and ideas of specific individuals. Many do this already. Here are a few examples.

Occasionally, art galleries ask individuals to give their own comments on what a painting means to them (often these personal views, especially those of children, are far more interesting than the more

usual official art historical interpretations).

History museums collect personal testimonies from people, describing things that were important in their lives and recording their oral histories. These words can be simply written up on labels or recorded and played through headphones or speakers.

Ethnographic museums, such as the African Worlds gallery at the Horniman Museum in London, bring in the words of individuals, rather than focusing only on groups of people such as tribes.

Some exhibitions are prepared by individuals or small groups, using a museum's collections and drawing on the skills of the museum (this is the approach of the Open Museum, part of Glasgow Museums).

A temporary museum in London during the Summer of 1999 was called the *Museum of Me*. In a press release the museum explained

Museums are often representative of national identity. The Museum of Me creates an opportunity to look at personal identity and at how the «me» relates to the «we»... As visitors travel round the Museum of Me they... experience, record and collect aspects of themselves from the factual... to the more ephemeral such as an untold secret, a dream or a fantasy... visitors' collections about themselves... will be sealed and stored. (Museum of Me 1999)

With new technologies it is now easier than ever to encourage large numbers of people to express their own views and share them with others. But even without new technologies, museums can organise discussions, and supply pen and paper or tape recorders, so that visitors can add

their own views, experiences and interpretations.

Large parts of existing museum collections represent official heritage, but museums can avoid this when they collect modern and recent items for the future. The better museums of recent history collect items that are associated with specific individuals. This means that there are personal stories directly related to objects in the collection.

There could even be a democratic element to the collecting and selection process – perhaps using television or radio for voting. Something like this has been proposed for the year 2000 in the UK. In a national scheme called *Millennium Treasures* people will vote for the things that are their favourite treasures, possibly leading to an exhibition of the most popular choices.

Using techniques like these, museums can work with a wide range of people to create, collect and interpret heritage. A museum should see itself as a communicator of knowledge and opinions from a wide range of people – not as the only creator of knowledge and ideas. The museum's key interpretive role should be to present individuals' personal experiences, knowledge and views to a wider audience.

SO WHO DOES CREATE HERITAGE?

Who creates heritage: the museums or the people? The answer is that both museums and individual people create their own versions of heritage – but rather than doing it separately it makes more sense if museums work together with people.

I want to end with extracts from a state-

ment of principles that the Museums Association has published about the accessible museum:

Museums belong to everybody. All members of society have a right to visit and use them. Museums have a duty to share knowledge and give delight, to be approachable at every point of contact, to reach out to new audiences... The health and vitality of museums can be judged by the quality of their relationships with people... Museums which demonstrate that they not only speak to their users, but also that they listen and learn, have a stronger claim for funding. Museums committed to improvement further inspire their staff and motivate their governing bodies... Accessible museums... need to consult and involve all their stakeholders including visitors, non-users, members of governing bodies, partners, funders and staff members... Consultation will be made more effective if museums show a generosity of spirit: a willingness to share collections, expertise and decision-making with others.' (Museums Association 1999)

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