Building Cultural Literacy
A paper outlining the importance skills in reading different cultures will be to our future, and the part museums have to play in developing them

Samuel Jones

This paper was delivered on 26th July 2007 at 'New Collaboration: New Benefits – Transnational Museum Collaboration’, held at Fudan University, Shanghai. The conference was organised by the International Council of Museums, ICOM.

Globalisation is a term that has been applied to pretty much every aspect of our lives. It has been applied equally to economies and technologies, as well as cultures and some languages. It refers to the phenomenon that we have seen develop in the recent past of increased interaction and connection between societies and cultures. As demonstrations everywhere from Genoa to Seattle have shown, to some, the concept of globalisation is a spectre, threatening cultures, communities and identities. To others, it opens new opportunities for commerce, cultural experience and other interactions that they consider beneficial to our lives.¹

What is fairly well agreed is that such enhanced interaction has forced us to rethink our behaviour, education and even ethics. All the trends engulfed by the
term globalisation mean changes, changes to the way we live our lives, to how aware we are of contrasts in economic development, to the way we learn, to scientific exchange, to the way we think about the world … the list could go on. Particularly, though, these global developments have led some of the world’s greatest minds to think anew about culture. The economist, Amartya Sen, for instance has pointed out that ‘globalisation’ actually has a much longer history than many might think and certainly cannot be equated so fluidly with the so-called ‘Westernised’ influences as some of its critics have been tempted to do. ‘Europe’, he argues, ‘would have been a lot poorer – economically, culturally, and scientifically – had it resisted the globalisation of mathematics, science and technology coming from China, India and the Arab world at the turn of the second millennium’.²

What Sen does not dispute is the increased opportunity for interaction. In fact, he sees this as demanding a ‘widespread public discussion’. ‘Many institutions’, he says, ‘can be invoked in this exercise of global identity, including of course, the United Nations, but there is also the possibility of committed work, which has already begun, by citizen’s organisations, many nongovernment institutions, and independent parts of the news media’. It will be no surprise to the audience today that museums have a place in this list too. Part of the debate, however, must be about skills. As well as relying on similarity and compatibility, globalisation can also accentuate difference, both championing diversity and, on sorrier occasions, fuelling enmity. This paper focuses on what this means for museums. I hope that it will help to connect some of the important collaborations that we are discussing here this week to other conversations in fields that vary from politics and society, to economics and ethics. What follows is, I hope, the start of a much wider investigation into how museums can help us relate to a new world.

*Reading the 300*
In early 2007, the film, *300* hit the cinema screens. Based on a successful comic book, it told the story of the Battle of Thermopylae in which the Spartans, led by King Leonidas, did battle with the Persian army of Xerxes, a vastly superior force. For three days in 480 B.C., three hundred Spartans held out against an army said to number ten thousand until, finally, they were betrayed. A man named Ephialtes had shown Xerxes a way past them. His treachery, however, did not prevent the episode becoming legend: the heroics of Leonidas and his small force had not only bought the Athenians enough time to muster a navy that could defeat the Persians, but also guaranteed their place in history.

The story of Leonidas and Thermopylae has been a theme favoured by artists from his own time to the present. The way that his story is told in different contexts gives us valuable insight into the past. His bust, for instance, was found at the Acropolis of Sparta – it tells us about Spartan values and gives us a sense of how the Spartans looked. Centuries later, the Spartan king can be seen again, standing in heroic classicism in Jacques-Louis David’s vast painting in the Louvre. This time, David’s choice of Leonidas and his depiction of him as the heroic nude tell us much about his values and the values of those for whom he painted.

Leonidas also figures in literature. Again, working forward from the original texts and depictions, it gives a sense of what people valued in the story centuries later, and why they might have chosen Leonidas. For instance, in *Don Juan*, the English poet, Lord Byron praised the Spartans’ valour, drawing on both their martyrdom and military prowess:

*Earth! render back from out thy breast  
A remnant of our Spartan dead!  
Of the three hundred grant but three,  
To make a new Thermopylae!*
Today, nearly two centuries after Byron was writing, the three hundred Spartans of Thermopylae still make appealing subject matter. In the US, 300 grossed nearly $71 million in its first weekend; by mid-May, worldwide takings amounted to some $440 million. However, while the film had international impact at the box office, it also generated an international response that the producers would certainly not have hoped for. It stemmed from the way the story was told. In conventional Hollywood terms, the Spartans were heroes of the film, and the Persians the baddies. Not surprisingly given the current climate of international relations, the depiction of Persians as a blend of the barbarian and sybarite in an American film aggravated an already sensitive situation.

Many Iranians were infuriated. Bloggers, writing on behalf of an audience of thousands, were quick to express their anger. Not only did the online journals that they wrote criticise the film, they also raised awareness of the offence that it caused. Ultimately, their protests became a story in their own right, featuring on the BBC News website, one of the most visited current affairs sites in the world. The profile of their protests escalated in both international terms and political terms. Omid Memarian, a leading blogger based in Berkeley, California, wrote of the film that ‘not only does it give the wrong outcomes to battles, it grossly misrepresents the Persians and their civilization ... It is unfortunate that very few curriculums in the US cover world history and it is very easy to misdirect the general public on historical facts’. Omid’s words, and those of his fellow protestors did not go unheeded by politicians: according to Javad Shamaqdari, a cultural advisor to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the film was ‘plundering Iran’s historic past and insulting this civilization’.

The offence caused by 300 shows how important culture is in how we relate to each other. It also pushes us to think about some of the complexities of the word itself. Generally, culture is well recognised to be a very complex word and its meaning can be debated endlessly and without resolution. The sociologist, Raymond Williams, once described it as one of the most difficult words in the
English language; play that out as we should in a multilingual context and we get a sense of how complex things are. The philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah offers a useful distinction between ‘culture’ as artefacts, broadly conceived, and ‘cultures’ as identity groupings lived and experienced. That distinction, as Appiah recognises, is useful conceptually in talking about culture, but is in reality often inseparable, culture representing the cultures that produced it, sometimes simply, sometimes with different cultures layered together in one object. In 300, a product of one cultural format, the US and Hollywood clashed violently with the culture of Iranian identity.

Shamaqdari’s comments about 300 also signify how close to politics culture and cultures can be. Others, too, have made this connection, and from the most surprising of sectors. Speaking at a conference in The Hague in March 2007, Gijs de Vries, the former Counter-Terrorism Co-Ordinator of the European Union was clear about this relationship. ‘Every day’, he said, ‘our lives are affected by culture and interpretations of cultural identity. Who we think we are affects how we think about others and how we behave towards them – whether in our community, our country, or at a national level’. The very confusion that the term ‘culture’, along with the cultural artefacts and plentiful cultures that we encounter, are coming to provide a focal point for the very same debates generated by globalisation. At a time at which culture is both gaining political recognition and people are finding more ways in which to encounter and find out about many more different cultures than before, it is therefore vital that we think about how we can broaden these debates both to include more people and to ensure that a greater number of people have the means and opportunity to participate in them. The issue is not how we pin culture down, but how we – the publics that encounter culture everyday – navigate the complexities that it can throw up.

In this way, the response of some Iranian protesters to 300 is very interesting indeed, and demonstrates how people are fusing contemporary issues with
technological capabilities and shifting attitudes to the past and cultural artefacts. The protestors created what is called a ‘Google bomb’. A ‘Google bomb’ is an internet term for an effort to influence the web presence of a given idea or name. The search engine, Google, works by aggregating the number of times a given word or phrase is linked to in Internet searches. By linking multiple times to a given page, it is possible to affect its rating on Google. In the business of the Internet and search engines, this practise has an established history as ‘Search Engine Optimisation’, or SEO for short. As businesses realised that appearing on the first page of Google or any other search engine translated fairly directly into cash, the drive to be on top became big business. However, search results can also be rigged, pushing given sites down the list of results shown, damaging their business. In this case, searches for ‘300’ were not only diverted away from the film itself, but also towards a website that displayed pictures of Iranian objects and heritage, the very objects that museums, galleries and other cultural institutions house. The website is called Project 300: it includes images by contemporary Iranian artists and links to the British Museum’s Forgotten Empire exhibition of Persian artefacts.

The significance of this cannot be over-emphasised. In relying upon the effect of viewing cultural artefacts to combat what they saw as being the ill-effects of popular culture, the bloggers bridged and demystified one of the most long-standing and debated divides that we face: the gap between popular and so-called high culture. It shows just how fluid people’s conceptions of culture can be, and how easily the bridge between different cultural forms can be made.

The story of 300 is also a demonstration writ small of some of the issues that I am covering in this paper. First, it underlines the importance of culture in international relations. Second, it demonstrates how incendiary cultural conceptions and, specifically, misconceptions can be. Third, it demonstrates how quickly, using new technologies, cultural disagreements can escalate. Fourth, it shows how individual opinions can move swiftly into major political and
international realms. And, fifth, it shows how people can turn to culture to assuage the effects of disagreement, looking to the cultural artefacts of the past as a means of defining and exemplifying their senses of identity.

**The need for Cultural Literacy**

For any who doubt the importance of culture in the world today, the story of 300 amply demonstrates both how different readings of culture - and the speed with which they can be made - can affect international issues, and also how culture can be a means of overcoming them. Of course, culture is not something that can replace the structures of diplomacy and politics, but we would be fools not to pay attention to its rising importance.

In an age of globalisation, culture is more important than ever before. This was discussed in the recent Demos pamphlet, *Cultural Diplomacy.* The pamphlet looked specifically at the role that culture plays in international relations. Where formerly diplomacy was seen as something that went on behind closed doors between small numbers of experts and professionals, now mass communication between people of different cultures - and from all over the world - must also be taken into account. We are in touch with, and can get in touch with, people from a wider range of cultures than ever before, and through experiencing their cultures gain a better understanding of them; or, indeed, a garbled misunderstanding. Now, since it is easier to find out about them, the question is whether or not we are doing so and what opportunities doing so represents. Of course, at the same time, we must also ask serious questions about how widespread the skills of reading other cultures are.

Thinking about diplomacy is a very good place to start, because it is a sector that is currently being redefined by changes in the way that we relate to one another. In January 2007, the former British diplomat, Carne Ross published a book that
shook the very foundations of the Foreign Service in Britain, the US and elsewhere. ‘It is ridiculous’, he said, ‘to pretend that the needs of an entire country can be embodied in a single diplomat, or embassy, or ambassador. It is inappropriate for the era we live in now’. Furthermore:

‘Diplomats tend to be generalists and unskilled in the complexities of the global issues, from trade to terrorism, which now dominate our world. Although I spent four and a half years reading intelligence on Iraq’s weapons and arguing about them with other diplomats, my knowledge was inferior to lifelong experts. On issues such as global warming, both the science and the policy can be beyond the grasp of diplomats’.\textsuperscript{13}

The same applies for cultural experts like museums professionals, who should equally be a port of call for diplomats. As culture becomes a vital space in which we relate to each other, so the role of the cultural professional and expert changes. Just as they should consult scientists and science policy-makers in relation to global warming, so diplomats should also consult cultural experts – like museums professionals – in relation to culture.

The point is not that culture should be put to the service of diplomatic or governmental ends; rather we have to be much more aware of the fact that culture is a space in which we interact on local, national and international levels. As we argued in Cultural Diplomacy, ‘the growth of new technologies, global communications, travel, migration and new democratic expectations of citizens means that we are all diplomats now’.\textsuperscript{14} More than the opinion columns and leaders in our broadsheets, it is culture by which we engage with each other and with other people. Culture has emerged not as a subsidiary to politics, but as a space in which the everyday interaction of people across the world will impact
upon politics. It is not a case of culture being put at the service of politics, but rather of culture being a determinant part of politics.

However, in relation to culture, we need to reinforce Carne Ross’ recommendations by thinking in terms not just of cultural professionals, but of the public as well. Confronted with the story of 300, museums professionals would no doubt have said that, yes, artefacts from the Persian and, latterly, Iranian past would be very useful counterpoises to the film’s imagery. They could also have used their informed perspective to warn that the film’s presentation and imagery was likely to have been very incendiary indeed. However, this needs coupling with an understanding that culture can be a determining factor in how people see the world. Iranians, like Omid Memarian were concerned not simply with the statements made by 300, but also with its potential to influence. The museum professional should therefore be consulted not just about how to respond to the potential ills caused by 300, but also much earlier in the chain to find ways in which the interpretation of different cultures can more comprehensively be a part of learning experiences the world over.

This is a vital point. In many ways, cultural products are neutral. That might seem a bit of a rash statement and, indeed, it is when we think solely in terms of intent. However, the philosopher, Hilary Putnam reminds us that ‘Meanings ain’t in the head’. In other words, as Anthony Appiah glosses, ‘what I mean doesn’t depend only on what’s in my brain’. Meaning is created by interpretation: ultimately, it is a negotiation between intent and reading. Consequently, as we encounter different cultures more and more, we need to think more about the skills we need to respond to them.

_The Implications of Cultural Illiteracy_
While developing the role for professionals working in cultural organisations and institutions like museums, we also need to turn our attention to the people who live, experience and create culture in all its forms every day. A good example of why this is occurred not so long back in the UK. It centred on a reality television show called Celebrity Big Brother in which minor celebrities live together in a house for several weeks on end, under the glare of cameras and the gaze of upwards of 5 million viewers. The format is something of a global phenomenon. Originally devised in Holland, it is now entering its eighth series in the UK, and versions exist in several countries, from Australia to Mexico, and from Russia to Argentina – in Africa, there is a pan-regional Big Brother. Viewers can vote for who will be ejected at the end of each week until, eventually, one is left as the winner. Contestants are not allowed to leave the house and are not permitted books, pens, paper, television or any of the other comforts of their everyday lives.

In January 2007, the winner of the UK’s Celebrity Big Brother was the Bollywood actress, Shilpa Shetty. Initially, the show lagged in the TV ratings, but it was catapulted to the front of both the newspapers and people’s minds by a furore that arose when three co-contestants fell out with Shetty over whether or not a chicken had been cooked correctly. In the days that followed, aspects of Shetty’s background were mocked and castigated by three of her housemates. Her name was mispronounced and her cooking criticised for being based on onions. Increasingly, Shetty - and Indians in general - came to be defined by the three housemates as ‘they’ or ‘them’. The press in Britain pounced. They singled out a protagonist, Jade Goody, a woman of 26 whom they had first hailed to fame after her appearance on the non-celebrity version of Big Brother in 2002. During the 2007 series, she was branded ‘a vile, pig-ignorant, racist bully consumed by envy’. The general reaction to the incident was to cry racism: however, as the academic and columnist, Germaine Greer, put it ‘the brouhaha about racism in the Big Brother House is a smoke screen that conceals … plain, everyday common or garden bullying’.
Here is not the place to get into the already well-rehearsed debate over whether or not the incident was fuelled by racism: nevertheless, the dynamics that lay behind the whole, ugly incident reveal much about the importance of culture, and the deficiencies in accommodating and responding to different cultures that we can face. Ultimately the girls who rounded on Shetty were unable to accommodate the cultural differences that they encountered – more than that, they picked up on difference not as a point of interest and conversation, but as a means to ringfence their concepts of their own identity and culture. At the same time, the press were quick to seize on this as racism because there was very little language otherwise available. Beyond the immediate effects on the individuals in question, the net result was enormous and potentially very disruptive indeed. The argument broke just as the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, was flying out to India, seeking to promote relations with Britain. As soon as he landed, the Prime Minister ‘in-waiting’ was confronted by burning effigies and a furore sparked by the actions of a naïve girl from Bermondsey, a corner of South East London.

The row caused by Big Brother betrays several underlying issues about which we ought to be worried. The actions of Jade Goody and her co-habitants speak volumes about some sections of British youth: they have a fundamental lack of skills in relating to and accommodating different cultures. This trend presents a challenge to the wider world as well. Looking again at the bloggers’ responses to 300, a similar complaint is apparent: as Omid Memarian, the blogger quoted above, said, ‘it is unfortunate that very few curriculums in the US cover world history and it is very easy to misdirect the general public on historical facts’. Often, there is a simple lack of awareness of other cultures and, when we encounter them, an even bigger lack of skills in accommodating them.

The speed and frequency with which we encounter different cultures has increased dramatically. In India, through the Internet or through networks of diaspora communities living in the UK, people quickly became aware of the precise nature of what had gone on in the Big Brother house; equally, Iranians
around the world were rapidly aware of the implications of a movie on US release. To be sure, communications technologies have spread at a far from equal rate across the world; however, they remain the revolutionising development of our age. For Anthony Appiah, ‘…the worldwide web of information – radio, television, telephones and the Internet – means not only that we can affect lives everywhere but that we can learn about life anywhere. Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities. … The challenge, then, is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become’.¹⁹ As before, his comments echo those of Gijs de Vries, mentioned earlier; however, in adding the new dimension of technology, Appiah also underscores the potent new combination that culture, mass communication and global technological links now form.

Looking at Appiah’s comments more closely, they set forth both a challenge and a solution. First, ‘we can affect lives everywhere’. Either for good or for bad, our actions can have impact, be it deliberate or otherwise. Second, ‘we can learn about life anywhere’. By doing so, we can come to understand and accommodate different cultures and this amounts to both a challenge and an opportunity for the museum profession in the global age.

**The impact of new technologies**

While the need for cultural literacy is sparked by technology, technology can also be part of the answer. Museums professionals have long been finding new ways of engaging with their publics and opening new audiences. As the work that they do in presenting other cultures becomes more important, it is to these new methods of engagement that we can look to find ways in which to build cultural literacy.
The speed with which news of the incidents of *Big Brother* and the responses to *300* spread demonstrate that new technologies and, in particular, mass communication technologies like the Internet, social software and social networking, digital photography, mobile telephony and a host of others have caused a groundshift in the way that we operate as individuals, professionals and as a society. In general terms, the Internet and, still more, high speed access to the Internet has revolutionised the way that we find news, communicate and share information. Couple this with an ever multiplying number of television channels and greater access via DVD and digital downloads to foreign movies, music and so on and it becomes clear just how significant are the changes that new technologies can lead to in relation to the production and consumption of culture. For instance, although not initially successful in China, the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* took audiences in the UK, the US and elsewhere by storm, sparking a flurry of similar films that included *Hero, The House of Flying Daggers* and – recently - *The Curse of the Golden Flower*, each picking up on the interest generated by the former. Not only have such films sparked interest in Chinese movie-making, but they have also encouraged Hollywood studios to invest in China: the Oscar-winning director, Quentin Tarantino, for instance, shot his film, *Kill Bill* there, creating jobs and investment in the process.\(^{30}\) Furthermore, they have come to play a vital part in the construction of China’s international image. As Joshua Cooper Ramo, writing for the British think tank, The Foreign Policy Centre said:

‘China’s vital, compelling contemporary culture is drawing fans from around the world. Three Chinese films are among the ten highest grossing foreign films in US history, a list that contains no Indian or Japanese films’.\(^{21}\)

The point here is not about the qualitative effects of films like *Crouching Tiger* on China’s image. Nor, absolutely, is it a point in favour of linking cultural production to political ends. Rather, it is intended to illustrate how through
technology and mass media, global cultural production and politics are merging in such a way that we need to consider the relationship anew. Moreover, this is not confined to either elites or corporate machines well-oiled with capital. Just as audiences around the world can see films like Crouching Tiger, so two young college students in Beijing were able to pick up on an abandoned 1990s boyband and create their own, spoof, international phenomenon, the Backdorm Boys by placing a video on a social-networking website. By mimicking a defunct US band, two Chinese students have achieved worldwide fame and sparked numerous imitators. In a further twist, the original band itself is now being marketed anew.

Developments in technology give culture an amplified frequency: we have the opportunity to experience, see, feel and hear a wider range of cultures and cultural forms than ever before. Museums themselves have not been slow to pick up on these developments. In the UK, Tate considers its website its ‘fifth gallery’ and, in collaboration with one of the UK’s leading newspapers, The Guardian, has given visitors the opportunity to curate work online. Across London, The Science Museum’s Who Am I? exhibit encourages viewers to go online to input their thoughts, which are then relayed on a scrolling display within the exhibit itself.

Museums, then, are already well practised in using technology to augment and innovate upon their existing activities in effort to draw in new audiences. In fact, they have often been at the forefront of innovation. In New York, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has offered visitors the chance to download descriptions of famous works, like Jasper Johns’ famous Flag since as long ago as July 2005. Downloads like this are called Podcasts, audio parcels of information that people can access online from the comfort of their homes, load onto their iPod or other MP3 players to listen to either at their convenience, or during their visit to the gallery where it can act as an alternative audioguide.22 Podcasts, of course, can also be downloaded from a different continent or anywhere where there is internet access. MoMA is not alone in its use of Podcasts to reach new audiences.
In the UK, the Victoria and Albert Museum offers a similar service and, in France, the Palace of Versailles has sought to ‘reposition Versailles as the main place for culture and technical capability, as it once was under Louis XIV’ by using podcasts.23 Other Museums, from the Smithsonian Institutions in Washington DC to the National Gallery of Canada, the British Museum and a host of museums across the USA offer lectures and other services as audio files to be accessed in similar ways. The question comes in how this change in the way that artefacts and other cultural forms are presented can be applied to the need to build skills in cultural literacy.

In thinking more about this, we need to bear in mind a significant caveat: podcasts and the like are accessible only to those with sufficient technological knowhow and access and, equally, are producible only by museums with the necessary resources and skills-bases. However, this should not distract us from the trend that they represent. In August 2006, MoMA’s podcast tour had reached number 21 in the iTunes top 100 list, the most frequently accessed material on Apple’s now definitive download charts. From its initiation in June 2005 to May 2006, the number of downloads per month had more than doubled from 618 to 1,444.24 Far from simply embellishing existing services, museums are using technology to access new audiences and to open the opportunities that they provide to a wider range of people. What the success of MoMA’s podcasts suggests is that they are also succeeding in bringing cultural artefacts and the discussion of what they represent to greater prominence in people’s lives.

In terms of building cultural literacy then, we have a starting point. Technology is not just enabling new audiences to approach cultural forms and artefacts in new ways, it is also reflecting and responding to the increasing appetite for people to do so. In other words - and we have a long way to go in making such opportunities more equitable in global terms - technological approaches to present us with a chance to bring more people into a relationship with culture that is less prescriptive and more driven by their own appetites and control.
**Greater participation**

MoMA’s podcasts also point to a second development that gives culture, and consequently museums, still further importance. While we can access far more cultures than ever before, we can also shape the way that we engage with them and inject our own opinion. It is not just that prospective museum-goers - or even those with a casual interest but either many miles away from the museum or not even intending to visit - can download a Podcast about Jasper John’s *Flag*; using the kind of technology available on most home computers, they can also record their own podcast and send it back to MoMA: after listening to the curator, what do you or I think?

This is a trend that is not confined simply to those with the technological means at their disposal. In London, Tate Britain recently launched a similar initiative. On entering the Gallery, visitors pass a stand with a wide range of leaflets. Each maps out a tour of the collection, but according to different moods. The optimistic visitor, full of the joys of spring can pick out a ‘First Date tour’; visiting a few months later, in less fortunate times, they might reach for the ‘Just split up’ tour. The final leaflet offers a new opportunity: it is completely blank – you can fill it in yourself and return it with a suggestion for a new tour.25 Arriving in the museum today, visitors increasingly expect to have the opportunity to comment or express their own ideas about displays. This expectation is common from its more elaborate forms, like the LCD display at London’s Science Museum, through to the simple comment-board at the end of exhibitions that allow visitors to write notes about what they have seen, learned, experienced and so on.

Again, this is not intended as an argument either for or against such visitor-oriented techniques. Proponents of such techniques could no doubt point me to further innovative examples; opponents might well provide me with an array of
less than successful examples. There is, however, enough to observe a trend. By
and large, visitors to museums and galleries are not so ready to leave their
baggage at the door. They bring with them their own attitudes, experiences and
so on, and museums have responded to this in their displays by not only
showcasing, but also reflecting cultures.

The second, and in some ways most important piece is therefore in place. People
are now approaching cultural provision very much with their own identities in
mind. To some extent, they always have, but there is now a definite trend to
bringing your own inflection to a work’s meaning and voicing it. In terms of
cultural literacy, this is very important. People are willing to make the link
between culture and identity. The challenge comes in reading the many different
cultural forms that we encounter in ways that contribute to a global conversation
of meaning.

A new role for museums

In presenting their collections in accessible, informative and innovative ways
museums have an obvious part to play in promoting the idea of cultural literacy.
In London, for example, we are spoiled. Visiting the Victoria and Albert
Museum, I can experience the military grandeur of Japanese Samurai, getting a
sense of the strict hierarchies and honorific past of that country by looking at
swords, armour and other artefacts. Minutes later, and a short walk up the
corridor, I can look at contemporary fashion from the UK, seeing and reading
about how Ozwald Boateng combines the fitted tailoring of Savile Row with the
bright colours of his Ghanaian heritage to provide a new image of British style,
culture and society.

Of course, to find such a range of opportunity all in one building is the privilege
of those who live near or can visit major international museums. We need to find
ways of extending such a mixture of opportunity around the world, bringing all cultures into a global conversation. The experience of a visit to any museum can be just as informative and this, technology allowing, should be extended. As the bloggers’ response to 300 shows, museum collections can be a vital means of communicating aspects of cultures. For Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘part of the obligation … will be to make those collections ever more widely available not just in London [or, for that matter, anywhere where there is a museum] but elsewhere, through travelling collections, through publications, and through the World Wide Web’.26

In communicative terms, museums are already very active in building cultural literacy. The challenge will be in building wider recognition of their role outside the sector, giving museums and their collections a greater part in education, and ensuring that they are supported in reflecting as wide a range of cultures as possible. Collaboration of the kind we are talking about this week will be vital in achieving this. There are, of course, challenges: just as visitors to London’s museums, or other major institutions like Beijing’s Capital Museum, New York’s Metropolitan Museum or New Zealand’s Te Papa are privileged in their access, so technology and the means to take exhibits the world over can be equally challenging for smaller museums, operating with fewer resources.

However, collaboration is possible. In 2006, for instance, the British Museum – working with UNESCO - supported and organised the tour of the Throne of Weapons around the UK. The Throne was made by the Mozambican artist, Cristóvão Estevão Canvahato: better known as Kester. It is constructed from weapons decommissioned after the civil war in Mozambique. Bought by the British Museum in 2002, it is a truly international piece: not least because the guns are not Mozambican in origin, but are migrant in their own right, representing a grim diaspora that dates back to at least the Second World War. Using sawn up AK-47s and guns that originated from countries from Poland to Portugal and arrived in Mozambique through the auspices of arms dealers from
any number of countries, Kester created a piece that spoke to a wide range of
different audiences. In the UK alone, it travelled from the British Museum to
Bristol Museum, and was displayed in venues that varied from Parliament to
Pentonville Prison. In each of the sites it visited, curators and others worked with
different audiences, each of which brought very different experiences to the
Throne. In the UK Government’s Department for International Development
(DfID), it spoke of the needs of Mozambique; in Pentonville Prison, it spoke of
gun crime; and in the Ulster Museum in Belfast, it provided a focal point for
communities only too familiar with the realities of civil conflict.27

The Throne provides a good example of how museums can work in relation to
cultural literacy. While the presentation and display of a diverse range of
artefacts can be very effective indeed in enlightening people as to other cultures
and building understanding, there is the opportunity to go still further. As we
have seen, culture is coming to play a greater role in thinking about how we relate
to each other as a global society. In responding in their different ways to the
Throne, the citizens of Belfast, the prisoners at Pentonville and the apparatchiks
of Whitehall were all relating their own experience to the cultural artefact. Such
freedom of approach and inflection might seem threatening to the museum. In
fact, it points to a new role. The skills and expertise of museums professionals are
vital to the new world in which culture, experienced and shaped in more
individual ways, is central to how we are going to communicate with each other.
Part of the role of museums will be in providing the ways of looking and talking
about cultural stimuli that will make that global conversation possible.
Specifically, the knowledge that they impart will be integral to an age in which the
voices in that conversation have proliferated, and each one can reverberate
around the world. The problem is that in an age of globalisation, our ability to
experience, encounter and engage with culture has far outstripped our ability
actually to understand it and this is where museum professionals have a real role
to play. Museums are not just about the past, they are about the present and the
future. The objects and artefacts that they contain and share are the way that we
will navigate and communicate the world. In doing so, collaboration of the kind we are talking about here takes on a new role. This paper, I hope, has underlined the need for wider recognition and support for the role that museums play. It is also a starting point for a much more detailed investigation of how to build cultural literacy.

---

3 Byron, G., Don Juan Canto iii, Stanza 86, 7
8 Williams, R., *Keywords*, (New York and Oxford, 1983)
14 Bound et. al., op. cit., 85
15 Appiah, K. A., *Cosmopolitanism*, 27-8
18 See above, note 3
19 Appiah, K. A., *Cosmopolitanism*, xiii
23 Quoted in Sadun, E., 'Museum Podcasts, writing for O'Reilly Digital Media, 4 December 2006, accessed online at
http://www.oreillynet.com/digitalmedia/blog/2006/12/museum_podcasts.html, on 6 June 2007
24 See Morganteen, J., op. cit., 35
25 For discussion, see Jones, S., 'The New Cultural Professionals', in Craig, J., Production
Values: Futures for Professionalism, (London, Demos, 2006)
26 Appiah, K. A., Cosmopolitanism, 130
27 For fuller discussion of the Throne of Weapons and its impact, see Holden, J., Throne of