

PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AS SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES

Kathleen Thorpe

Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Keywords: Cultural heritage, cultural values, World Heritage List, World cultural treasures, natural monuments, sacred structures, architecture, museum, libraries, archives, cultural rights, education, national costume, regionalism, religion, pilgrimage, language, cultural identity, literature, food, tourism

Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Museums
 3. Social Dimensions
 4. Political Dimensions
 5. Economic Dimensions
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical sketch

Summary

The protection of cultural heritage has not only social but political and economic consequences as well. Whereas the constitution of a national and personal identity is closely tied to received cultural heritage, this heritage, as far as material culture is concerned, requires financial support often beyond the means of the countries concerned. International support is rendered by organizations such as UNESCO with its World Heritage List, which includes World Cultural treasures as well as Natural Monuments. Museums of all kinds provide protection for many cultural objects and artifacts, as do libraries and archives involving both state and private initiatives. Socially, the United Nations has been instrumental in pursuing the cause of the Cultural Rights of peoples, with social and educational consequences for majorities and minorities in states throughout the world in terms of respect and tolerance for different religions, languages and cultural customs. Cultural heritage encompasses all aspects of cultural life including language, literature, food and customs. Politically, cultural heritage can be either a cohesive force or a divisive one when exploited for political purposes directed towards political hegemony. Economically, the cost of preserving cultural heritage can be a lucrative source of income as a result of the global promotion of cultural tourism.

1. Introduction

Since the 18th century, there has been a shift in the concept of what constitutes public culture and the ownership of public space. In contrast to such countries as the United States, Australia and New Zealand, which have been colonized over the past 300 hundred

years, and where it has been possible to bypass some of the stages in the change of attitude toward public property and space undergone by older civilizations, the past two hundred years in European countries, for example, have seen greater access to cultural spaces and artifacts that were once the preserve of a ruling elite. Gardens, once the preserve of the nobility, for example, have now become public parks and private collections of art of all kinds now belong to the people of the relevant society.

In the global dimension, as far as the sphere of material culture is concerned, the landmark “Agreement for the Protection of the Cultural and Natural Heritage of the World”, adopted at the UNESCO General Conference in 1972 and finally implemented in 1975 is of particular importance. The elected committee emanating from the member states and signatories of this convention, together with input from ICOMOS, the International Union for the Conservation of nature and natural resources (IUCN) and the World Heritage List, also assists in the preservation of registered monuments and historic sites.

Whereas it was possible in Roman times (3rd century B. C.) to compose a list of the most excellent and imposing cultural monuments of the Ancient World and to limit their number to merely seven, i.e. the pyramid of Giseh, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, The Temple of Artemis in Ephesos, the Olympian statue of Zeus by Phidias, the Mausoleum of Harlikanassos, the Colossos of Rhodes and the Lighthouse on the island of Pharos near Alexandria, the intervening two thousand years have produced a great many objects, which are seen to be deserving of admiration and preservation by a variety of cultural groups all over the world.

World Cultural Treasures and Natural Monuments acknowledged by UNESCO appear on the World Heritage List. The meaning of the particular monument, its state of preservation and the presence of a convincing preservation plan are examined by UNESCO. These are prerequisites for financial support toward the preservation costs by UNESCO. By 1993, 275 cultural, 87 natural monuments and 18 in both categories had already been included in the World Heritage List. In addition to this List, there is the Red List for especially endangered World Heritage objects and sites. More recently monuments have also been included, for which the signatory states had not submitted an application for financial support.

Apart from continuing attention paid to such unique sites as the city of Venice, one of the best examples of combined international effort to preserve a historically important site from destruction is the reconstruction of the two temples at Abu Simbel, which came under threat at the time of the building of the Aswan Dam. On a UNESCO initiative, the two temples were divided into 1036 blocks cut out of the rock and reconstructed on a site set 60 meters above the original location. 48 nations were engaged in this enormous project, which ultimately cost \$41.7 million to complete. The original site now lies beneath Lake Nasser.

World Heritage Sites include not only buildings or complexes of buildings, but also whole cities and a variety of sacred and architectural structures such as, for example: Aksum, Carthage, Machu Picchu, Venice, the Cathedral of Chartes, Mont-Saint-Michel and its bay, Dubrovnik, the Aachener Münster, the castles Augustusburg and Falkenhorst in Brühl, sites in Goslar, including the silver mine Rammelsberg, the church of St. Michael in Hildesheim,

the former Abbey in Lorsch, the old town of Lübeck, the castles and parks of Potsdam and Berlin, the monastery of Maulbronn, the old town of Bamberg, the old town of Bern, the monastery of St. Gallen. One of the most recent historically important (1999) additions to the World heritage List is the Wartburg fortress near Eisenach in Germany, where the Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther translated the New Testament of the Bible into German. In addition, this site is also of important as the place where the “Wartburg Festival” took place in 1817, when students protested for the first time for a free and united Germany.

Natural World Heritage sites include unique places of natural-historical value requiring protection and preservation. Well-known natural World Heritage sites are the uninhabited Gough Island in the Atlantic with its unique and untouched marine, animal and bird life and the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. More recent additions to the list of Natural World Heritage sites are the palaeontologically important Sterkfontein Caves, the St. Lucia estuary and Robben Island in South Africa.

Individual states have policies and institutions both private and public for the protection and restoration of historical buildings and monuments, such as the National Trust in Great Britain. Provinces and municipalities, as well as private initiatives have served to preserve, for example, the homes of famous writers all over the world. The town of Weimar in Germany, where the German Classical writers Goethe and Schiller lived, is a site of cultural heritage for all German-speaking peoples. Monuments such as statues and gravestones are further examples of these activities. Many countries have War Graves committees on both a national and local level to attend to these commemorative sites, which often have a significance extending into the political sphere as well. Cemeteries as sites for the preservation of national heritage because of the famous people buried there include, for example, the Mehringer cemetery in Berlin and the world famous cemetery of Montparnasse in Paris, where, among many other prominent names, the graves of the writers Emile Zola and Heinrich Heine as well as of the ballet dancer Nijinsky are to be found. Mausoleums and crypts, as well as relics of saints are items of cultural heritage of a religious nature. Known throughout the world are such structures as the Taj Mahal in India and other sites of historical and political importance, like Napoleon’s tomb in Les Invalides in Paris, and Lenin’s mausoleum in Moscow.

2. Museums

A feature of urban culture is the institution of the museum for the conservation of a variety of objects of cultural interest. Derived from the Latin: museum= place of learned occupation, from the Greek mouseion= seat of the Muses, the museum has, particularly since the 18th century come to mean a building housing a public collection of artistic and scientific objects.

Since the earliest times both secular and religious institutions as well as individuals possessed collections of valuable objects, which served to enhance the prestige of their owners. Apart from individuals who collected “curiosities”, collectors such as Lorenzo de Medici in Florence and many others, as, for example, the works in the Vatican collected by means of commissions and donations, laid the foundations for later developments. The first public museum in Europe was the British Museum, which opened its doors to the public in

1753 and which houses many objects, some of which have become contested with regard to ownership, such as the Elgin marbles, which Greece would like returned. Similar claims have been made by Egypt for some objects such as the world famous bust of Queen Nefretiti, housed in the Egyptian collection of the castle of Charlottenburg in Berlin. The ownership of treasures plundered from conquered countries has become a matter of international debate and negotiation in recent years. Claims for treasures from Russian collections taken as war booty by Germany during the Second World War and German objects and paintings seized by the conquering Russians at the end of the war have become more frequent. So, too, has the debate concerning the ownership of paintings and other objects d'art stolen from the Jewish citizens of various European countries occupied by the National Socialists. They are being discovered today in various collections both public and private all over the world.

Museums such as the Louvre in Paris house some of the most famous objects in the world such as the statue of Aphrodite of Melos, also known as the Venus de Milo, and the Mona Lisa painting by Leonardo da Vinci. Further examples of well-known museums and art galleries are the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Art History Museum) in Vienna, the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery in London. American galleries known throughout the world for the famous paintings they house include the Guggenheim Museum and the Boston Museum of Modern Art. In Asia, the National Museum in Tokyo houses a wide selection of art objects and paintings and porcelain from the earliest times through the various dynasties.

Often the museum buildings themselves are architectural monuments of cultural significance such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Takasaki, and the Museum of Modern Art in Kamakura, both in Japan. These include many churches and religious structures all over the world.

The 19th century in particular can with much justification be called the age of the museum. In the early 19th century objects such as the sculptures of classical civilizations, particularly Egyptian, Greek and Roman were collected, later in the century, attention turned to Gothic painting and the paintings of the Renaissance. The Hermitage in St. Petersburg is an example of a private collection, which was taken over by the state and opened to the public. Today, collections are increasingly devoted to particular interests, for example, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as such varied collections as clocks, toys, tobacco, etc. Military museums present an overlap between the historical, cultural and political spheres as can be seen in the Military Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, which houses exhibits from the time of the mighty Ottoman Empire.

“Open Air” museums include not only the type of reconstructed theme park museum that has become popular in recent years, but also important sites that have survived in the open or have been excavated. Archeological sites such as the city of Pompeii, the Forum Romanum in Rome, the Acropolis in Athens, the city of Ephesus in Turkey, the Great Wall of China dating from the 15th century and the Terracotta Army also in China are but a few examples of these important, cultural heritage sites which are protected and much visited by tourists.

Craft museums were originally intended for the training of craftsmen, but after 1900 they

were increasingly viewed purely as cultural and artistic collections. Such museums are often found as part of collections in formerly rural areas and overlap in their offerings with folk museums. Today there is a great variety of museums devoted to design in household goods, shoes, clothing, jewelry that serve not only as a commemoration of the past, but as inspiration to the present generation of craftsmen and craftswomen. The reaction against mass-produced goods in the developed world has produced a demand for individually made and handcrafted goods, ranging from household items and paper to clothing, textiles and jewelry.

Whereas in the 19th century the function of the museum was perceived as bringing a new order into old collections and to accommodate these in a representative building, today museums are increasingly devoting attention to bringing the past alive by among other things, installing interactive exhibitions, often with an educative intention as a means of increasing the number of visitors by attracting school visits. The educative function of the museum, where culture and science overlap, is found in the role of the Natural History museum. Famous Natural History museums include those to be found in London and Vienna, the Smithsonian Institute in the United States of America and smaller collections such as the Feldman Institute in Moscow, where Czar Peter the Great's initiative in exploiting the large supply of Russian semi-precious stones, unites gemology with geology, the craft of stone-cutting and artistic design. Thanks to modern means of transport, many collections from all over the world are sent on tour, and the cultural heritage of many nations and peoples can now be viewed and studied by those who would not themselves be able to visit the museums and galleries that house these items.

Many cities around the world have museums devoted to the town or city itself, thus combining the historical, cultural and political dimensions of the exhibits. Well-known examples of such city museums are the Museum of the city of London and the Museum of the City of Vienna. The preserved cultural heritage of cities can be seen in the unique Guild Houses in Brussels and Antwerp, recalling the trading activities once centered in Belgium and also lending these city centers their unique charm.

Further sites of cultural heritage are, of course, libraries and archives, which often overlap in importance and function with museums, where manuscripts, books and other historically important documents are also often housed. The oldest known library was the clay tablet collection of Assurbanapal, King of Assyria in Nineve. The famed Library at Alexandria was the greatest library in Greco-Roman antiquity. Ephesus and Pergamon also boasted famous libraries. The first public library was founded in Rome in 39 B. C., and in Constantinople this tradition was continued. The most important libraries in early Christian times were to be found in Rome (Lateran Palace) and in various monasteries, as for example the library at the Monastery of St. Gall in Switzerland, established under the influence of Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionary activity. In the late Middle Ages university libraries became important. Most countries have a State Library, usually located in the capital city. A State Library collects the entire book production of the relevant country and is, therefore, a valuable resource center, not only for the inhabitants of the country itself, but for foreign researchers, too. The public lending library, open to all, was and still is one of the most important institutions promoting literacy and cultural awareness. The modern technological age has brought about many changes in reading habits globally.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 11 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

Bibliography

BENNETT, TONY (1995). *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge. [The origin of and the function of the museum in modern times]

LOWENTHAL, DAVID (1998). *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. Cambridge University Press. [The theft of cultural artifacts by colonialism]

URRY, J. (1990). *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage. [The problem intercultural interaction through the tourism trade]

WALLACE. "Mickey Mouse History. Portraying the Past at Disney World. *Radical History Review*, 32, 1985. [how the cultural heritage is made easily digestible for the masses and falsified in the process]

Biographical Sketch

Thorpe, Kathleen: Associate Professor, German Studies in der School of Literature and Language Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Teaches German Literature. Has published widely on contemporary Austrian prose, women's literature, gender studies, multiculturalism, and literary translation. Has translated books by Peter Rosei.