



WORLDS IN A MUSEUM

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Summary of Session on Museums and Globalization:

The stories told by exhibitions are told through the objects they present. And those objects, like all objects, include evidence of the circumstances of their history: the history of their form and materials, imagery and iconography, discovery and subsequent ownership. It is fashionable to be critical of encyclopedic museums as colonial or imperial institutions with collections resulting from an imbalance of power. Objects bear the imprint of their histories. Many of those in the British Museum or the Louvre are imprinted with the evidence of empire, and not only of the British empire but of the empires of Assyria, New Kingdom Egypt, China, Rome, and the Mauryan and Mughal Empires of India, too. Political power is an aspect of their history that must be acknowledged. But empire is no simple thing.

It is a truth about empire that despite its violence, it has and does contribute to the overlapping of territories and intertwined histories. As Edward Said reminds us in his book, 'Culture and Imperialism': "Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude. Who in India or Algeria today can confidently separate out the British or French component of the past from present actualities, and who in Britain or France can draw a clear circle around British London or French Paris that would exclude the impact of India and Algeria upon those two imperial cities?"

Cultures are humanly made structures of, in Said's words, "both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude." Or, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the Indian-born scholar who has lived and worked in Paris, Oxford, Los Angeles, and New York, has written, "A national culture that does not have the confidence to declare that, like all other national cultures, it too is a hybrid, a crossroads, a mixture of elements derived from chance encounters and unforeseen consequences, can only take the path to xenophobia and cultural paranoia."

This is the lesson and importance of encyclopedic art museums: they are the repositories of material evidence from which so much of the global history of the world can be written.

Protecting, documenting, and sharing that history is the responsibility of such museums: they remind us that the history of the world is inevitably a history of entanglements and networks, of the sharing and overlapping of economic, political, and cultural developments, and that a nation's history is ineluctably intertwined with global history.