

# Culture Shock:

Tolerance, Respect,  
Understanding  
...and Museums

Summary

clms





## What's the Problem?

It can hardly have escaped your notice that the world is right in the middle of a swirling debate about culture: about who 'we' are; about 'our' way of life.

The razing of the World Trade Centre, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, rioting in Burnley, Bradford and Oldham, terrorist bombings in London, and daily arguing over immigration and asylum issues. They're all connected with 'our' way of life and how little we understand other people, and ourselves.

Citizenship (how we interact with the state) has made it on to the National Curriculum; Community Cohesion (how we interact with each other) has its own department in the Home Office; and Identity (how we understand ourselves) pops up everywhere from trashy TV talkshows to serious University research tracking people's elusive 'Britishness'.

Work on these things (Citizenship, Cohesion and Identity) in this country is, ultimately, about strengthening the fabric of society before it gets torn by ignorance, intolerance and inequality.

What's this got to do with museums?

Simple really. Citizenship, Cohesion and Identity are all about culture and understanding. Museums are all about understanding culture. So they're all about the same thing. And that means museums can help prevent the infections of ignorance, intolerance and inequality spreading across British society – using understanding as a kind of vaccine.

But this is a massive challenge that won't submit to undiluted rhetoric. We need to be sure about what we're saying here.

Let's take a closer look.....



V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum

## Who Are We?

*Culture Shock* was built by the Campaign for Learning through Museums and Galleries (clmg) with the skills, expertise and forbearance of some of the country's leading organisations in the field of cultural identity, cohesion and citizenship.

In particular, but in no particular order, they were:

- o Michelynn Lafleche, Director of the Runnymede Trust
- o Sir Bernard Crick, Chair of the Advisory Group on Living in the UK
- o Jonathan Duke-Evans, Director of the Social Policy Unit at the Home Office
- o Cormac Bakewell, Policy Advisor to the Director of Countries Regions and Communities, at the Commission for Racial Equality
- o Jocelyn Dodd, Deputy Director of Leicester University's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries
- o Mary Bryden, Director of Public Programmes for the National Museums of Scotland
- o Sally MacDonald, Manager of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London
- o Carmel Kerr, Head of Refugee Integration Section at the Home Office
- o Finbarr Whooley, Deputy Director of the Horniman Museum
- o Stephen Allen, Head of Learning & Access at the National Portrait Gallery (until Feb 2005)
- o Don Flynn, Policy Officer at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
- o Vaughan Jones, Director of Praxis
- o Mark Warren, Refugee Integration Section, the Home Office
- o Sandy Buchan, Director of Refugee Action
- o Mark Taylor, Director of the Museums Association
- o Sue Wilkinson, Director of Learning and Access at the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
- o David Anderson, Director of Learning and Interpretation at the Victoria and Albert Museum
- o Nick Dodd, Chief Executive of Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust
- o Nicola Nuttall, Director of the Campaign for Learning through Museums and Galleries

## What Have Museums Got To Do With This?

If museums are about anything, they're about understanding the cultures of the world. It's true that they mostly apply this to ancient kingdoms like Egypt, or historical periods like the Bronze Age but their bread-and-butter skills are in collecting artefacts and stories about cultures, discussing and interpreting them with the public and generating debate, learning, enjoyment and understanding from them: *exactly* the processes and skills we need to explore identity in modern society, and nurture the roots of citizenship and cohesion. It just means training museums' cultural firepower on modern societies. Nothing more radical than that.

They're well placed to deliver too. Not only is their day job about cultural understanding, but also the museum network reaches into every area of the UK and touches almost everyone: There are 2,500 museums and galleries (more than the big four supermarkets *put together*). 100 million visits are made to museums every year (more people through the turnstiles than football). And they are custodians of something like 1 *billion* artefacts (more than 15 things for every man woman and child in the land, and enough to stretch the 385,000km from here to the moon). They have the assets and the infrastructure to make a major impact on cohesion, identity and citizenship.

They've also got the right values and attributes: the perspective, on a sometimes overheated debate, that comes from a long historical viewpoint; the neutrality that comes from having nothing to sell except understanding; and a long pedigree in making meaning, making choices and making sense of cultures from around the world. It means they can generate the curiosity based on understanding (rather than animosity based on ignorance) that the debate in this country so badly needs.

If we're serious about tackling cohesion, identity and citizenship through understanding; museums are right in the centre of the target.



Image courtesy of Hackney Museum

### Reality Check

Are we over-claiming museums' capabilities? Museums aren't perfect. They're not the solution to everything. They can't cure obesity or make trains run on time. Can they really make a difference here? There are certainly some challenges. If the US example is anything to go by, maybe we might have to temper our ambitions: the level of social trust in different states and communities can be correlated with historical differences in social capital among the societies from which migrants originally came. Minnesota, for example, with its high levels of Scandinavian ancestry, enjoys markedly higher trust and social capital than comparable areas.

If museums are to successfully deal with culture, they'll need to embrace oral traditions, customs, languages, moral codes, values, ideas and aspirations. It's about culture you can hear, see, smell and taste, as well as 3-D artefacts you can touch and put on display in a gallery. How will museums respond to these challenges? The best ones are already there, but can we replicate that UK-wide? We need to know.

A museum's job of choosing what is relevant and what isn't, is a skill that is too often hidden and will be in more demand if we are to help communities decide what's important about their cultural stories. But communities are not prepared to hand over their culture and accept whatever prescribed treatment it receives from the experts. Can museums meet them half way? We think yes, but it'll need some work.

## This Is Not A Culture-Free Zone

No one is culture-free. Decisions about what goes in and what stays out of work on cultural identity, cohesion, and citizenship are affected by the culture of the decider. So before we get into saying what we think museums could do, we ought to say where we stand. Here goes:

We must not be shackled by the notion that culture is an absolute thing that you get from your parents and give to your children.

The wrong-headed simplicity that files people by skin colour or continent is just not tenable. Talking about, for example, 'Indian culture' takes no account of: Hindu or Muslim; Punjabi or Hindi; rich or poor; rural villagers or city-types; or myriad other dimensions. It says that these are all minor details compared to the in-born, hand-me-down, unmovable, cultural essence given away by your skin. This is just wrong. Culture is a flexible, fluid and malleable thing that changes throughout your life and from generation to generation.

Cultures can be defined by the people on the margins. Who's in jail, who's classed as mad, who's got no power, who's not allowed in. Museums' work should not only help us all understand other cultures, but hold up a mirror to the ones we're familiar with and help us reflect on them. We would be saying that a big part of what happens when you're exposed to other cultures is that *you come away with a better understanding of yourself*, a broader perception of others and the insight to link the two.

Working on cohesion, identity and citizenship is not about making everyone the same. We can have difference, and we want difference, but we want it based on understanding, debate and learning, not on pretending it doesn't exist. As Ted Cantle reported on his investigation into the rioting in Lancashire towns in 2001: "...the failure to communicate is compounded by the lack of honest and robust debate as people tip-toe around the sensitive issues of race, religion and culture." It's like being at a party where all the conversation is small-talk because no one dare mention politics – everyone appears to get on, but it's superficial. That's no future.

Our work should be about celebrating, discussing and understanding *all* cultures (including the most prevalent). It would be counterproductive to unduly highlight minority cultures and would defeat the point of debating culture as a *whole*. It's essential if we're going to discuss similarity properly, rather than reinforce difference.

Relativism just doesn't work – how could we justify the relative merits of a gun culture for example? It might be OK in matters of food, drink and music, but what about slavery, or beheading people for adultery? Museums need to facilitate debate and choice about what is better and worse. Recognition, respect and esteem are about choice; about what deserves to be recognized, respected and esteemed. They're not something you can hand out to everyone like sweets.



Image courtesy of National Museums Liverpool

### Stars to Steer By

We may find most value in debating cultural *similarity* rather than difference. This could be done by taking a thematic approach to the things that define most human life: security, physical and spiritual needs, rights of passage, sex, birth, death, family, god(s) and nature. Of course people's different cultural responses to these would be discussed but in a way that would highlight unity rather than create enmity. *Every* culture includes some form of cosmology, ethics, mythology, the supernatural, religious ritual, and a view of the soul.

People make their own mosaic of the issues that are important to them. Single issues are where it's at, and this trend will be vital in shaping our work on cohesion, identity and citizenship – we'll need to build-in a personal dimension to all of it, not just talk trends and global issues.

This is about two-way communication. We're not selling shrink-wrapped culture from a delicatessen to anonymous consumers, we're reflecting, debating and creating cultural perspectives *with* them.

# clmg

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**Home Office**  
**BUILDING A SAFE, JUST  
AND TOLERANT SOCIETY**

Our thanks to the Home Office for helping us create *Culture Shock*  
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## So What?

It isn't enough to be a match-maker between a big issue for society and a big public network that can be part of the solution. It's easier to hide amongst the camouflage of saying what the issues are, than set out some proposals for criticism, but we didn't want to flinch from saying what we'd do because, in the end, that's what will make a difference. Remember though, it's a plan not a straitjacket; and with 2,500 museums in the UK, we'd expect these ideas to be the first, not the last, word. See what you think.....

What could happen broadly falls into two parts: listening; and story-telling. They're the input and output sides of what museums do best – collecting stories and artefacts; and replaying them through exhibitions, learning and interpretation – all in the service of helping people *understand* different cultures.

The jigsaw pieces we envisage would be:

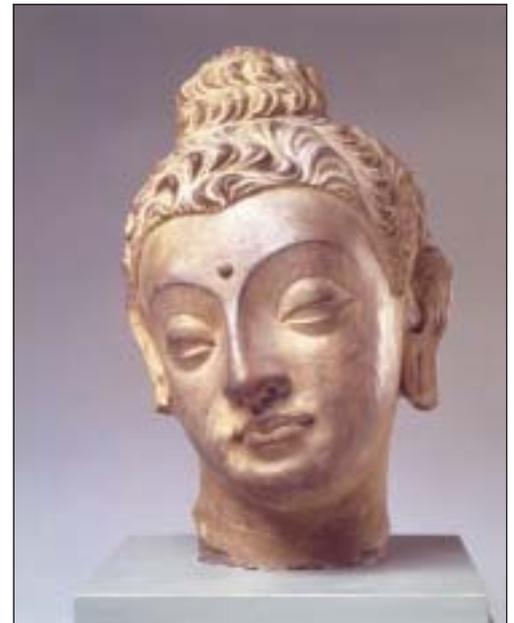
- o Collecting new stories and artefacts via: personal museums; community collecting; international outreach; and a one-world programme
- o Story-telling and showcasing peoples' experiences via: culture boxes; culture gateways; cultural windows on the high street; and a blockbuster exhibition

(We explain all these things on the next page)

Fitting the jigsaw together would look like this:



By story-telling *and* listening museums can create the two-way communication so badly needed in the cultural identity debate



V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum

### Whats happening already?

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York has recreated the apartments in which over 7,000 immigrants from all over the world came to settle in America. Personal guides link the historical experience to the present day, and encourage visitors to discuss contemporary social issues such as the use of detention centres to house immigrants. Trained facilitators are available for those who want a more detailed discussion following their tour, during a special programme called 'Kitchen Conversations'. In partnership with the New York Times, the museum has also recently published 'The New York Times Guide for Immigrants in New York' to help newcomers settle in.

At the National Museum of New Zealand (Te Papa Tongarewa) a permanent display area entitled 'Passports' examines how migration has shaped modern day New Zealand. Te Papa Tongarewa is also one of the few museums in the world that is truly bicultural with Maori and settlers taking a more-or-less equal stake in everything the museum does. It has a permanent community gallery that is dedicated to, and created by, a new community every two years. And Te Papa is the venue for an open Maori meeting house (handed over to a different tribe every 2 years).

- A *Personal Museums* programme would be one in which individuals create their own museums (facilitated by professionals) as a way of making sense of their impressions of life in Britain, and as a forum to express their stories of birth, life, death, displacement, migration & settlement in this country
- A *Community Collecting* programme would take the same shape as personal museums but on a community basis (families, faith communities, any other definitions communities want to make). The same game, but for more than one player
- An *International Outreach* programme would capture the stories of migration and settlement from British émigrés abroad – to replay their stories inside the UK and reveal migration as a two-way street and not an invasion
- A *One-World* international programme would take stories of life in Britain to peoples' home country museums – collecting stories in the UK and telling them in India, Pakistan, Iraq, Poland...name a country; there are no limits to the geography
- *Culture Boxes* would be a programme of cultural welcome material for new arrivals in the UK, scaleable from a personal, portable, culture pack to exhibition-size outcomes at museums and in other venues like asylum accommodation centres; unravelling culture for everyone to discuss
- *Culture Gateways* at points of entry would effectively use the vast wall and floor space at ports and airports to tell the story of people flows across the world at different times in history and today – getting at many of the 200 million travellers a year, just at the time they're thinking of flying or sailing into another country's culture
- *Cultural Windows* on the high street would use, for example, travel agents' windows to exhibit stories and artefacts from other cultures (an everybody wins scenario: travel agents get lively window displays, migrants and residents get to tell their story, shoppers and window-shoppers learn something they didn't know)
- A *Blockbuster Exhibition* at one of the major national museums would capture the attention of the public and the museum community, and reveal the natural fit between museums, cultural identity, citizenship, and cohesion – as a prelude to extending the work across the network of 2,500 museums and galleries, and an outlet for the riches we'd expect to unearth by asking people to tell their stories



Image courtesy of National Museums Liverpool

#### United Nations, Literally

The most recent UNESCO convention (from 2003) demonstrates that, worldwide, there is an increasing recognition that communities are best placed to record and preserve their own cultural heritage and that professionals (like museums) can give them the tools to do so, the time to discuss it, and the space to display it.

## Are You Talking To Me?

We're not talking about someone else's museum in some other part of the UK here.

We're talking about yours.

*But* we're not telling you what to do, we're telling you what *we'd* do.

And we are asking you to give it some thought and do *something*.

Who we are, how we relate to other people and how we connect with the state are three of the biggest issues we'll face in our lifetimes.

They're all about culture; and culture is why museums were invented. It's their day job. It's what they do. They can make cohesion, identity and citizenship work.

Ask yourselves how you could play a part in that.

Can you really stand aside and do nothing?

Museums don't have to pretend they're something they're not to connect with this agenda. They don't have to distort what they do to chase a bandwagon with money on it because culture (including identity, citizenship and cohesion) *is* what they do.

Think about it.



V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum

### Whats happening already?

Robben Island in South Africa (infamous for its regime of brutality endured by thousands of political prisoners under apartheid) opened as a living museum in 1997, interpreting the island's 400-year history and contributing to the social, economic and cultural transformation of South Africa. The museum believes that every South African has the right to experience its legacy, so they also have *Robben Island on the Move*: a fully operational mobile museum that takes the story to the people in every part of the country.

At National Museums Liverpool, the Community Partnerships team spends much of its time building relationships. For instance, they have recently been helping a Caribbean group in Toxteth to collect and preserve a community photographic archive. In order to build and demonstrate trust, the museum has collected nothing from the exercise – the sole purpose is to enable the community to develop the skills to build their own archive for themselves.

The National Museum of Australia has a TV and radio studio called the Talkback Classroom, where young people from secondary schools across Australia can enter into debate with some of the country's leading politicians. During 2002-2003 over 1000 students participated in political debates with major politicians from all parties.

Back in the UK, 15,000 children per year participate in the education programme at the National Centre for Citizenship and the Law (at the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham), and other leading museums are starting to collect artefacts and stories about modern, multicultural, Britain – The London Museums Hub, for example, is working with local Kurdish, Turkish, Afghani, Somali and other communities, to collect and preserve their heritage through short films, exhibitions, long-term archive planning, and cultural events.

Unusually there will be no public output from the projects, *unless the communities want it*. The focus is entirely on the process, enabling communities to decide what they wish to preserve, and shape how they will record and keep it – to create a legacy where communities can affect what and how the museums collect and present their stories for the future.