The Art of Diplomacy: Museums and Soft Power

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At its most basic, power represents 'the ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not.' So wrote Joseph Nye in his foundational study on the shifting contours of American power at the end of the cold war (Nye 1990: 154). Nye, importantly, spoke to an alternative, or 'soft,' form of power that lies in attracting others willingly to your position by fostering in them empathy or envy, self-identification or aspiration. Culture both high and low reflects a society's meaning and signals its values, which together with its practices and policies comprise its core soft-power resources (Nye 2008, pp. 95–96). As stewards of culture, museums have potential to broker in international soft power, working alongside or in partnership with institutions and governments to influence broad-based, positive change. Yet museum practice traditionally has been regarded as ulterior or tangential to the formal realm of international relations. By harnessing their existing soft-power resources and embracing their latent influence on the international system, museums have the potential to be powerful agents of change, using their unique strengths and comparative advantage to address the most daunting global challenges.

It is undeniable that museums possess soft-power resources in abundance. Their collections include examples of civilization's highest achievements in visual culture, and by making these objects available to people around the globe, whether in person or through digital offerings, they foster some of the very sentiments—awe, pride, admiration—through which the persuasive power of public diplomacy operates. That museums are routinely ranked higher than both media outlets and government institutions as trustworthy sources of objective information legitimates their efforts, which audiences largely consider to be absent an international political agenda (Cuno 2006, pp. 17–18; Ruiz 2014).

Museums likewise employ classic methods of public diplomacy, transmitting messages in ways that allow recipients to arrive at their own conclusions. Museums craft displays and offer interpretation, yet visitors decide on their level of engagement—the didactic materials they choose to read or listen to, for instance, or even their route through the galleries—fostering the notion that their experience of the museum is their own. The narrative, however, is dictated by the objects shown and their means of display, and the prescriptiveness of the story is made less perceptible through careful curation. Thus, the museum emerges as a consummate agent of soft power—that is, a subtle peddler of influence, promoting an agenda of its own devising.

In addition to specific narratives advanced through exhibitions and programs, museums can signal certain values—creativity, sophistication, dynamism—that reverberate outward (Lord and Blankenberg 2015, p.38). Take Bilbao, where the construction of a dazzling outpost of the Guggenheim Museum turned a little-known city in Spain's industrial north into a coveted cultural destination. The museum reinvigorated the city's stalled economy by sparking a boom in tourism and an influx of creative firms looking to benefit symbiotically from Bilbao's newly enriched cultural milieu. The so-called Bilbao Effect has helped other cities, among them Abu Dhabi, Denver, and Metz, redefine themselves through their cultural offerings (Moore 2017), demonstrating how museums can become vital to the societies and economies in which they operate—or, to look through the lens of IR theory, potent systemic actors with sufficient power to exert influence over the system.

Existing literature on museums and soft power demonstrates persuasively that museums can use their influence to their own advantage, and to that of the (usually urban) centers in which they are located (see, e.g., Lord and Blankenberg 2015). What impact, then, could museums have if they acted not only on behalf of themselves and/or

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their localized urban ecosystems but at the international level? They are certainly fit for the task, for it cannot be denied that museums are international actors, exerting influence far beyond their gallery walls. Indeed, according to the political scientist Christine Sylvester, 'a major art museum today is an institution that is heavily political, often involved with or implicated in international relations, and savvy about power' (Sylvester 2016, p. 6).

Certain museums, like the Guggenheim and the Louvre, have become globally known brands by opening satellite locations around the world. Others manage to exercise a considerable global reach from their home cities, whether through encyclopedic collections or large-scale exhibitions, the latter invariably requiring international collaboration. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's blockbuster Michelangelo exhibition of 2017, for example, included loans from fifty collections across eight countries—a marvel not only of logistics but also of international diplomacy. For in the same way that a foreign ministry cultivates alliances, it is only through relationships built over years of careful diplomacy that museums can earn the trust necessary to ensure the loan of such vaunted cultural treasures.

In mirroring the diplomatic practice between states, museums engage in 'unofficial political relationship-building,' as asserted by the British think-tank Demos in a report exploring the potential of cultural diplomacy (Bound et al. 2007, p. 12). Among the report's recommendations is that the UK government seek out 'more opportunities to engage leading cultural professionals in the policy-making process' and actively promote the work of museums and cultural institutions in 'priority countries'—that is, those of political and economic interest to the UK, among them Brazil, India, and China (ibid, pp. 46–47). The implication is clear: museums broker in a valuable form of international political capital that, if properly deployed, can help develop strategic relations among states.

For those who would argue that the diplomacy carried out by museums is too low-stakes to matter within the international system, it is worth reconsidering their work per a liberal institutional framework. The cultural sector operates in the manner of an international regime, with well-defined actors—museums, curators, cultural ministries—fulfilling prescribed roles, and with established rules and norms governing its operations, from the indemnity procedures required to transfer art across borders to the UNESCO conventions ensuring legality of provenance. If culture is indeed integral to soft power, on which the balance of international smart power relies, then the stakeholders of the cultural regime have their part to play.

And what is culture if not a political entity? One need only to look to its weaponization in times of armed conflict to recognize its political character. For belligerents seeking to subjugate or even eradicate populations, cultural property has long been a proxy target, as with the Nazi theft of Jewish art collections during World War II or, more recently, the destruction and plunder of heritage sites in Afghanistan, Mali, Iraq, and Syria by Islamist terrorists. Monuments and objects of cultural significance embody identity, worth, and community (see, e.g., Bevan 2007). Their denigration is thus an effective way of victimizing populations, amounting to a form of cultural erasure that some have equated with the tactics of genocide (Bokova 2015; Luck 2018).

UNESCO, the UN Security Council, and other institutions at the supranational level have recognized the broader threat posed by this destructive practice, especially when deployed in campaigns of terrorist violence. They have acted primarily through conventions, resolutions, and other legal frameworks, but enforcement and compliance have proved elusive, often rendering such efforts moot (see O'Keefe 1994; Muscat 2020). Museums, responding quickly to urgent need, have generally pursued a more frontline approach, providing direct support to peer institutions in conflict zones while also spearheading preservation and research initiatives. Their efforts, though localized and more limited in scope than those pursued at the international level, have nonetheless had tangible results.

We see here museums engaging independently—and successfully—with an issue of international concern, not least because its growing association with terrorism has acute implications for global peace and security. To thus persist in the argument that museum practice exists ulterior to international relations is naïve.

Moreover, by working in parallel to rather than in partnership with museums to combat threats to cultural heritage, international institutions deny museums the exercise of their unique comparative advantage. This advantage rests not only in their resources and subject-matter expertise but also in their reserves of soft power. After all, working with a known peer toward a shared goal is invariably more attractive than facing the bureaucratic hurdle of negotiating

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with a foreign ministry or meeting the obligations of an international convention. Welcoming museums as partners in this fight would doubtless result in policies that are more informed—and ultimately more effective—in ending the destruction of cultural heritage and redressing its harmful effects.

It cannot be denied that museums are international actors, exerting influence on the international system, operating in accordance with a liberal institutional framework, and demonstrating their efficacy in addressing issues of global importance. Their agency lies in large part in their soft power, whose potency derives from strong networks of good-faith, international relationships and deep reserves of public trust.

Soft power is known to be a crucial factor affecting the overall balance of influence within the international system. Considering, then, the extent of museums' soft-power assets, it seems a missed opportunity not to enlist their help in addressing a broader range of issues in collaboration with state- or supranational-level institutions. To what extent might museums improve relations among states by opening up alternative avenues of communication and exchange? What potential new audiences might they reach with messages advancing the cause of social justice and climate action? By looking for international relations 'where we least expect it,' as Sylvester (2016) advises, we may well find new and effective pathways to change.

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