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EDITORIAL

Special issue

Looking back: understanding visits to museums in the UK and beyond since the nineteenth century

This is the second of two special issues of *Cultural Trends* dedicated to identifying and interpreting numbers of visits to museums since the nineteenth century. The first exclusively considered UK museums - English museums, in particular. The present issue adds to that coverage of museum visiting in England, Wales and Scotland, as well as addressing visiting in France, Australia and New Zealand.

Even extending *Cultural Trends'* coverage to other Western countries can only provide us with a very narrow glimpse of the history of museum visits. Five years ago it was estimated that there was one museum for every 130,000 people on the planet (Rocco, 2013). A more recent listing identified 55,000 museums in 202 countries (De Grutyr Saur, 2017). Whatever the flaws of these data, or the scale of museum growth in the Middle East and China in particular, these are likely to represent the minimum global museums population, and they suggest that museums are regarded as

... essential to the fabrication and maintaining of beliefs that have constituted the core of modernity about the nature of meaningful relationships between subjects and objects, between individuals or communities and the worlds they weave about themselves (Preziosi & Farago, 2004, p.1).

And, yet, as the AHRC funded project *Mapping Museums: The history and geography of the UK independent sector 1960-2020* testifies, much research is still needed to even establish the number of museums in individual countries.¹

Quite apart from wrestling with the evidence of how many museums there are, or have been, scholars from various disciplines are increasingly coming to see museums as as visitor-centred, rather than object-centred, institutions (Davidson, 2015) several commentators are challenging conventional beliefs. These include the assertion that "no two museums", nor their publics, are alike (Deuchar, 2002): evidence suggests that far from being completely differentiated, visitors overlap (MORI, 1999). Bourdieu & Darbel's (1966) perception of visitors as socially stratified and differentiated has also been problematized (McCarthy, 2013) and overtaken by explorations of visitors' own experiences (Harris, 1990).

Visiting has been studied at individual institutions (Bergvelt & Hörster, 2010; Savoy & Sissis, 2013), and more generally (Rees Leahy, 2012) as a way of revealing subtleties of contemporary society (Hill, 2005). But, as Selwood (2018) commented, visit data (which can be found in museums' annual reports and archives) are infrequently referred to in institutional histories and rarely, if ever, used systematically (see, for example, Stearn (1981) and Whitehead (2005)). Given that convention, it is hardly surprising that none of the growing number of non-Western museum histories should draw on the statistical data available (Aso, 2014; Shaw, 2003 ; Mathur & Singh 2015).

But, while visitors are the central focus of many examinations of contemporary museum practice, they have been treated more fleetingly in historical works and mostly referenced through qualitative sources (Hudson, 1975; Poulot, 2012). The geographical and chronological coverage of visitors and visiting is also uneven, with most published work centering on individual German, Dutch and Belgium museums for limited periods in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bergvelt & Hörster, 2010; von Wezel, 2013, 2018).

Hardly anything is known about broader cross-institutional patterns on the level of cities and countries, let alone across national borders. This issue of *Cultural Trends* tries to make a start in this direction by offering contributions, which take a multi-institutional approach to examining museums, in different geographical contexts.

For the UK, Adrian Babbidge's "Non-National Museum Attendances in the UK" explores visit numbers to regional and local museums. He provides a provisional Index for the growth of museum visits between 1891 and 2015, summarises the overarching national socio-economic trends that contextualise the sector's expansion, and identifies the key factors that lead to annual variances (sometimes of substantial magnitude) at local levels.

Mark O'Neill's "Museum visiting in Edinburgh and Glasgow", traces the history of museum visiting through a comparison of the two Scottish cities, famous for their historical and cultural differences and notorious for their rivalry. He explores the current visitor demographics of Glasgow Museums, with those of the National Galleries and the National Museums in Edinburgh, and investigates the extent to which these differences can be traced back to the founding cultures of these institutions.

Comparisons of museum visiting across national borders, even across the Empire, are even more scarce than single country studies. Some basic comparative data is available though a limited number of sources. For example, Eurostat provides twenty years' worth of comparative statistics on the five most visited museums in every EU country (Deroin, 2009-11).

The *Art Newspaper* annual ranks the top ten most popular exhibitions in their categories from around the world². In terms of analysis, the *European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen* (EUNAMUS) project funded by the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission (2010-13), made insightful use of recent qualitative and quantitative visiting data³.

Beyond these immediate concerns, consideration has also been paid to connections and comparisons across Europe, especially France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux region (González de Oleaga & Monge 2009; Meyer & Savoy 2013). However, we have no long-term analysis of museum visiting as an indicator of wider societal trends, based on long-term regional and national empirical data. More research would not only contribute to a greater understanding of museums' evolution and to our comprehension of the nature of cultural engagement, citizenship, identity formation and leisure. Combining comparisons with attention to interactions would enable us to comprehend differences within, and between, countries, and how relationships between institutions shaped each other globally - something quite distinct from the provision of global coverage (Conrad, 2016).

Research to date suggests that museums in the Anglophone world systematically recorded and published their visit numbers since the nineteenth century. Lee Davidson and Conal McCarthy's "Lies, damn lies and statistics" examines the distinctive history of museum visits in Australasia through a comparative study of eight institutions - four in Australia and four in New Zealand. Situated in former settler colonies that have been transformed in recent times, these museums can be seen to reflect social change, migration, and the resurgence of indigenous peoples.

The same preoccupation with recording and publishing this kind of data was not a feature of most of nineteenth century Continental Europe. While a few museums kept visitor books since the eighteenth century (Ruge-Schatz 2007; Nys, 2009 Bergvelt & Hörster, 2010; Linnebach 2012), major national museums did not necessarily collect data systematically until the late nineteenth century. Some only published figures after c.1970. The reasons for this are in themselves worth exploring.

By definition, the differences between institutional and national practices inevitably pose certain challenges for comparability, but also open interesting question as to why the counting of visitors was initially so different and why it became increasingly harmonised internationally. Files from the French national archives suggest that museums in different countries communicated about their visitor numbers and the impact of charging - implying

that common trends might result from similar patterns of mutual emulation and competition like elsewhere in cultural policy (Swenson, 2013).

In the absence of comprehensive studies on museum visitors in any European country before the late 20th century, we have chosen France as a starting point for a European case study. Astrid Swenson's "Where are the numbers? Counting Museum Visitors in France" offers strong similarities with Britain. On the one hand, a variety of museums developed in their capital cities at around the same time, which attracted local, national and international audiences; on the other, they represent different patterns of administration, free admission and, arguably, different attitudes to museums as public institutions. The fact that, since the late nineteenth century, policy makers compiled a wealth of comparative studies on museum visiting across Europe, helps to shed light on how historical actors themselves reacted to different attitudes towards counting and why there was a pull towards standardisation across borders over time.

There is much to distinguish the research articles published in the two special issues of *Cultural Trends* dedicated to understanding visits to museums since the nineteenth century. They refer to different types of museums, including those funded by central and local government, as well as independents, and those that have survived, been transformed, amalgamated or perished. They describe findings that pertain to different numbers of museums, in different geographical areas, over different reference periods, and draw on data sets likely to inspire different levels of confidence.

Nevertheless, a key achievement of the research collected here has been to simply uncover how much untapped, but informative, statistical information exists on museums over the past 160 years. The articles have investigated when, and why, museums were prompted to count visits and, if so, how they counted them, and highlighted when, and why, museum histories at both institutional and national levels, did, or did not, draw on the data available to them. They have focused attention on what drove the collection, and retrospective analysis, of those data sets, and the values attached to them; explored museums' own explanations of fluctuations in their figures, and applied retrospective analyses drawing on micro-level, institutional and macro-level, societal variables, and have implicitly, if not explicitly, questioned the uses to which those quantities of data has been put.

Beyond shedding new light on the institutions explored in, what are effectively, case studies, we hope that the data, methodology and interpretation of museum visiting here stimulates the development of comparative and entangled histories of museum visiting, to understand the specificity of local and national contexts, as well as nature and impact of

connections across the globe.

We believe that the content of these two issues of *Cultural Trends* present an opportunity for government departments and arms-length agencies, within the UK and internationally, to reflect on the efficacy and consequences (intended and otherwise) of past policy decisions, to clarify the outcomes they are seeking from current policies and the mechanisms by which they hope to achieve them.

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Notes

¹ <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/art-history/research/projects/mapping-museums-the-history-and-geography-of-the-uk-independent-sector-1960-2020>.

² <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/top-10-exhibition-and-museum-visitor-figures-2017>

³ <http://www.ep.liu.se/eunamus/index.html>