



Peabody Museum

of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University

11 Divinity Ave. Cambridge Massachusetts 02138 617-496-1027 www.peabody.harvard.edu

A Museum's Purpose

When we conceptualize the purpose of museums, we simultaneously (if implicitly) express our perception of their responsibilities – what it is we think they are, and what it is we think they should do. From this, we also conceive our criteria for assessment, in deciding whether or how well we think a museum is meeting its obligations.

This discussion guide aims to help students enumerate the various purposes that we commonly expect museums to fulfill; to articulate the values that are expressed within these assigned purposes; to differentiate between the people and needs affected by each; and to contend with the overlapping, at times conflicting, responsibilities at stake.

Following your museum visit, students should be able to begin to discern the gray areas that are produced by the museum's multiple purposes and its responsibilities to its various stakeholders, and to debate with one another what they believe should be prioritized, or how a museum might best navigate this complex field of decision-making.

How to Use this Discussion Guide

This guide was inspired by spaces and staff within Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, and most directly responds to realities located there. While some of these considerations may be specific to the Peabody Museum, the majority may be applicable to all museums, in part if not wholly. We encourage users to consider this guide even when visiting other institutions.

This guide by no means encompasses all of the complexities implicated within the roles commonly assigned to museums, nor all of the challenges each individual museum faces within

its own specific environment in trying to balance the demands each role makes of it. More simply, this guide aims to encourage students to enter into this topic, and to complicate their conversations there by compiling the issues they may raise. Have your students review this guide while visiting the museum and ask them to consider the space in light of the considerations it offers, using them to provoke student debate.

To maximize the guide's impact, consider further scaffolding students' experiences at the museum with shared reflection before and after their visit. Below are some suggested activities:

Before Class Visit:

- a) Have students think about what they perceive the purpose of a museum to be, and to write down their thoughts. Have them share what they've written on a class discussion board, or submit it to their instructor.
- b) Have students review the discussion guide before their museum visit, so they are prepared to think about and discuss how they perceive the museum's different purposes while on site.

During Class Visit:

- a) Have a museum staff member lead your visit. The staff member will discuss the many roles and functions the museum strives to fulfill, and will be able to answer specific questions relating to the museum's practice that students won't otherwise be able to access.
- b) Have students discuss the Cases to Consider in pairs or small groups. The goal should not be for students to formulate a single answer or come to a unified conclusion, but to drive one another's thinking and experience the variety of perspectives likely to be expressed.

After Class Visit:

- a) Have students write down any remaining questions at the end of class. Send these questions to the Academic Partnerships department at the Peabody Museum. Forward answers provided by AP staff to your students.
- b) Have an AP staff member come to your next class or section to answer any questions that arose during the class visit, especially those pertaining to the specific context of Peabody Museum.
- c) Assign some of the suggested further readings listed within the guide.

- d) Have students write a reflection on how they understood the purpose of a museum before their visit there, and whether or how this changed following it.
- e) Have students reflect on how they see these overlapping purposes manifesting in specific decisions made by the museum; how they think these overlapping purposes may be affecting decisions at the museum (where they may not all be visible); or how they believe such overlapping purposes *should* be factored into the museum's decision-making processes (regardless of whether this is what the museum is already doing, or would require a change in current practices).



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Discussion Guide:

The Purposes and Responsibilities of Museums

Why do we think museums exist? Do we think museums should exist? How do our expectations of museums shift as our perceptions of their purposes shift? Do some purposes matter more than others, or matter more in different moments? How do we decide whether museums are living up to their responsibilities?

A note to begin:

Museums commonly refer to the people they serve as “stakeholders”; that is, all those with a “stake” or particular interest in the history, stewardship, and/or future of the collections in a museum’s care, and on whose behalf the museum functions. While a widely accepted term, it is exceedingly difficult to define in any given moment, in particular when applied broadly to the notion of “community stakeholders.”

This discussion guide largely does not offer specific definitions for these terms, and we encourage you to make this a part of your class conversation. For the purpose of better engagement with the case studies, please note that “heritage stakeholders” refer to people with a historical relationship to specific collections at the museum and are members of communities with a shared collective identity, often grounded in common governance, ancestry, or cultural traditions. “Descendant communities,” “Indigenous communities,” or “creator communities” are heritage stakeholders whose ancestors were the original makers and owners of the collections, or who are represented in and by the collections.

Thinking about: The Public

Museums are probably best known as public-facing institutions, with public-service responsibilities. Museums are also known as educational spaces, responsible for providing opportunities for learning and discussion.

If museums are accountable to the public, they must meet the public's expectations of them while simultaneously working toward the public good. This is the case even where the educational role of museums would ask them to teach the public something different from popular conceptions, or to address difficult topics that may upset or anger many people. While the museum may believe strongly in its responsibility to pursue a controversial topic or activity, it may not be able to do so without putting public trust at risk.

Concerns over trust may involve museum visitors; local, state, and federal governments; corporate sponsors; individual donors; and other audiences.

Question: *Is it the museum's responsibility to give the public what it wants?*

- What is the museum's responsibility to educate the public when it comes to controversial topics, that are unpopular among or may alienate their largest constituencies?
- What may be the consequences of defying the public's expectations? Of meeting the public's expectations?
- Who constitutes the "public"? Should some public constituencies be privileged over others? When? Why?
- What may be the consequences of losing trust? Of choosing to protect trust in one area, at the stake of losing trust elsewhere?

Thinking about: Collections

Preserving material collections is often perceived as an integral part of a museum's core purpose. Within the average museum, only about 3-5% of materials are on display at a time. Collections care, documentation, and access constitute a large proportion of museum work. Through preservation and conservation, museums protect the collections in their care in order to ensure they will remain intact for generations to come.

“Using” collections – for example, displaying them in an exhibit; making them available for study and research; renewing their relationships with descendant communities and other heritage stakeholders– puts collections at risk with regard to their long-term preservation.

Question: *How should museums balance what are arguably their two primary purposes – the preservation of collections and the sharing of collections?*

- Why might preservation for the future be prioritized over present needs or preferences?
- What constitutes “reasonable” risk? Who should decide this? Using what criteria?
- Should it always be the same people making these decisions? Using the same criteria?
- What structures, procedures, policies, etc., might a museum need to have in place in order to make these determinations?

Thinking about: Descendant Communities and Heritage Stakeholders

The history of museums, including the history of anthropology and anthropology museums, is rooted in colonialist practices. The separation of materials of cultural heritage from their communities of origin; the realities of conquest, disease, and dispossession that supported this separation; and the racist intellectual paradigms that justified the creation of museum collections, divided them between academic disciplines, and infused their subsequent display and interpretation to the detriment of the peoples they represented, are significant parts of these histories.

Addressing these realities and affirming people’s authority over their own cultural heritage is widely considered a major responsibility now for contemporary museums. Museums increasingly look to work with descendant communities and heritage stakeholders to rebalance these relationships, to redress past actions, and to transform best practices.

Question: *What are the responsibilities of museums toward descendant communities and heritage stakeholders?*

- What positive purposes can museums serve for descendant communities and heritage stakeholders?
- What might collaboration or shared authority between communities and museums look like? In what ways would this work be visible?

- What should a museum do if it receives contradictory instructions from different communities, or from within the same community?
- What burdens may museums place on communities, in deferring to them to make decisions, or by potentially entering into community rifts?
- How should museums care for materials whose community origins are uncertain, or whose descendants have no centralized office or obvious point of contact?
- What is the relationship between community needs and those of other stakeholders? When, why, or how should one stakeholder's needs take precedence over another's?
- How do we assess if a museum is meeting its responsibilities to communities? How do we measure impact?

Thinking about: Knowledge Production

As educational institutions, museums produce as well as disseminate scholarship through the study of collections; many museums even have associated research institutes or labs located within their facilities.

Throughout its history, the Peabody Museum has prioritized research, and people such as artists, novelists, and musicians, in addition to anthropologists and archaeologists, continue to access collections for a wide variety of purposes.

Question: *To what extent should museums act as a gatekeeper of what research can be done with collections?*

- What is a museum's obligation to restrict a researcher's access to culturally sensitive materials, especially if they are secret or sacred within the originating culture?
- What if a museum views a project as unethical?
- What if a museum views a project as bad science?
- What if a research project requires a process of analysis that is destructive? What if it is only minimally destructive?
- What questions should a museum ask, to decide if or how it should support someone's research?

Cases to Consider:

- 1) Museums are entrusted with building collections and preserving them over time. A museum with aging facilities finds it does not have the resources it requires to update its storage climate controls, putting collections in its care at risk. Moreover, the museum's mission has changed over time, and some collections no longer fit well within its mandate. Should the museum be allowed to sell these collections in order to upgrade its facilities? What if the collections were donated to the museum, with the expectation they would remain there in perpetuity? What if they are purchased by a private collector who is unlikely to make them available for public display or research?
- 2) A descendant community gives a museum instructions for how to care for its collections, which include prohibiting women from touching those items restricted to men. Some female staff are offended that they should be prevented from doing their jobs because they are women. The museum is legally prohibited by US law from enforcing the community's instructions. How should the museum proceed in its care of these collections?
- 3) A heritage stakeholder group has contacted a museum and requested that certain items be returned to them so that they can be allowed to decay naturally. This same group has also requested that other items from their community should remain within the museum's care, with the museum instructed to deny public or researcher access to them. What should the museum do?
- 4) An artist wants to access a museum's collections, but the museum staff believes the artist's project is one of cultural appropriation. Does the museum have an obligation to facilitate this research visit? Does the museum have an obligation to deny this research visit? Does the museum have an obligation to try to mitigate what it sees as potential harm?

Recommended Further Reading:

Ames, Michael. "Introduction: The Critical Theory and Practice of Museums." In *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, 3-14. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992.

Carr, David. "Balancing Act: Ethics, Mission & the Public Trust." *Museum News* 80, no. 5 (2001): 29-32, 71, 73, 75, 77, 79, 81.

Cameron, Duncan F. "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum?" *Curator: The Museum Journal* 14, no. 1 (1971): 11-24.

Frieman, Catherine J. and Lisa Janz. "A Very Remote Storage Box Indeed: The Importance of Doing Archaeology with Old Museum Collections." *Journal of Field Archaeology* 43, no. 4 (2018): 257-268.

Gurian, Elaine Heumann. "On the Importance of 'And': Museums and Complexity." In *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design: Purpose, Process, Perception*, edited by Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, 34-44. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018.

Lonetree, Amy. "Museums as Sites of Decolonization: Truth Telling in National and Tribal Museums." In *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*, edited by Susan Sleeper-Smith, 322-337. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

Mithlo, Nancy. "'Red Man's Burden': The Politics of Inclusion in Museum Settings." *The American Indian Quarterly* 28, no. 3-4 (2004): 743-763.

Pantazatos, Andreas. "Does Diaspora Test the Limits of Stewardship? Stewardship and the Ethics of Care." *Museum International* 62, no.1-2 (2010): 96-99.