

Objects, Knowledge and Representation: A glimpse into the rhetorical discourse of the British Museum with a focus on the “Islamic World”

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Introduction

It has been suggested that the events surrounding the French Revolution initiated the creation of the first modern museum: the Louvre. Through its inception, this institution's founders sought to demonstrate the goodness of the state and the civic thought of its leading citizens¹. The birth of the museum inspired the burgeoning of this institution throughout the West. Roughly around the same time as the Louvre, the British Museum was founded in London (1753). Today, the museum's literature articulates a pedagogical motive, where the institution claims “to advance understanding of the cultures” it represents and that “its collections belonged to the nation, and admission was free and open to all.”² Upon reading this, one could inquire: what kind of understanding is represented within the discourse of such institutions? By investigating such a discourse, we aim to discover the subjectivities and rhetoric in which a variety of knowledge-power relations are carried. Tony Bennet, in writing about the Birth of the museum¹ summons Michel Foucault's work to suggest that often there is a mismatch between the articulated rhetoric of the institution and the actual functioning of the institutional technologies that assemble the overall discourse³. This is because within the discourse, there are illusive goals and rationalities at play that are difficult to isolate. With that said, the purpose of such an analysis is not to reveal intentionality, but rather to describe the effects of power encapsulated within practices. The purpose of this essay is to take a glimpse into the discourse associated to the British Museum, with one focal point being its exhibit of “The Islamic World”.

Sources and Methods

Perhaps one way to enter an analysis of the discourse is by examining the *institutional apparatus/technologies* associated to the British Museum⁴. One can look at the museum itself as an apparatus; however, I have chosen to focus on apparatuses and technologies within this institution. By institutional apparatus we could include: “legitimacy of authority” and “legitimacy of scientific expertise” and so on. Although with Foucault, the differentiation is not always clear, by institutional technologies we mean elements such as practical techniques used to implement power: design of architecture, windows and displays, websites, and so on. I find sympathy with the Foucauldian approach to power, which recognizes power as being not only hegemonic, moving from top to bottom, but with a wider lens it asserts that power is everywhere, because discourse is everywhere.

To begin, I decided to employ the visitor map⁵ of the museum as a material substance that would act as a gateway into my inquiry. To limit my scope, I traced a path from the main entrance of the museum to the “Islamic World” space. I focused on the visual forms to look for regularity (order, correlations, positions...etc). It has been suggested that discourse analysis, specifically visual discourse analysis is not just about what is seen and what is said, but what is not seen and what is not said⁶. What is most interesting to me is that through a discourse, knowledge-power relations can be constructed in such a way where it can be ideological⁷. By ideology, we mean, knowledge that is constructed in such a way to legitimate unequal social power relations. According to Stuart Hall, if ideology is effective, it is because it works at both the “rudimentary levels of psychic identity and the drives” and also at a social level, through discursive formation⁸. To address these dynamics, I will at certain points in my analysis utilize methods such as those offered by semiotics, in an attempt to marry the two paths to produce a broader understanding of the subject matter. In addition to the museum map, I have taken photos to record and illustrate my observations.

In terms of scope, this essay does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of the British museum; however it hopes to offer an introductory glimpse into the subject matter by looking at examples of subjectivity, institutional apparatus and technologies that construct this discourse.

¹ The book *Birth of the Museum* was written by Tony Bennett in 1995 published by Routledge press.

Institutional Apparatus: Legitimacy of Authority

By looking at the British Museum Map⁹ (See Appendix for photo), one can observe another apparatus at work. There is explicitly a link to the British Museum website, which is an example of an *institution technology* utilized to establish such a “legitimacy of authority”. On this website, a space is created to convey the history of the museum. From this site, I have chosen a *lexias*¹⁰ for analysis. The website states: “From its beginnings the British Museum was a new type of institution. Governed by a body of Trustees responsible to Parliament, its collections belonged to the nation, and admission was free and open to all.”¹¹ Before discussing the *lexias*, it is worth mentioning that in a discourse, knowledge does not necessarily mean true knowledge; in fact ideology works by seeming “true”. In the previous *lexias*, the words: “belonged to the nation” and “open to all” connote equality in access to the site; but as suggested previously, the reality is more complex. In addition to this, two expressions: “body of Trustees” and “Parliament”, are utilized to denote authority. Both terms act as symbols and have connotations of authority, prestige, and legitimacy that is leveraged to shift the signified from one signifier to another, from the body of Trustees and Parliament to British Museum. The utilization of design elements such as texts, symbols, captions, color, space, comparison, contrast serve to persuade and convey meaning for the visitor. This way the museum is constructed daily as an articulation and manifestation of the state’s “soft power”.

Technologies of Design

Returning to the map (which shows the layout of the British Museum), one could note that a visitor from the main entrance passes a staircase on the left, a gift shop on the right, to walk through a pathway which leads to a bright white segmented space labeled as the “Great Court”¹² (See Appendix for photo). This room is massive in size and the architectural design of this room connotes a temple-like aesthetic. Here, the ceiling is high, almost transparent in appearance, as if reaching towards the sky. A tower-like structure is positioned at the center of the room with stairs spiraling towards the top, similar in appearance to the biblical *Tower of Babel*,¹³ with a pathway to higher levels. The design allocates a reading room inside the center of the tower to connote knowledge and learning. From the vantage point of the “Great Court”, the museum’s architecture serves to divide power into two directions: first horizontally, then vertically. The architectural design and positioning of various public spaces and labels disperses power outward and vertically down from the higher level to the lower levels of the building. Specifically, proximity to the tower connotes power in general. Interestingly enough, the tower is inscribed with names of sponsors; thus these technologies support multiple apparatuses including the apparatus of sponsorship being a means to access the governing authority of the institution.

Since the “Great Court” is a rectangular space, there are two large exhibits that run parallel to it: “Ancient Egypt” and “Enlightenment”. On the rear of the building is a room anchored by the text “Living and Dying”. All three segmented rooms are designed to manifest space and depth by the use of high ceilings (See Photos in Appendix). Where the walls and ceilings meet one could observe tiny cameras. At the British museum, surveillance is achieved in a number of ways. Although security guards and exhibit staff are scattered about the building, there is element of self-policing that seems to be inherent in the visitors. The security cameras throughout the building make one conscious of such invisible *panopticon*¹⁴ that is monitoring the visitor’s every move. The role of the visitor in this traditional museum is to passively consume the objects that the producers display. This is at least what Hooper-Greenhill argues. The public museum was shaped into an apparatus with two deeply contradictory functions: ‘that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education’ and also of disciplining society¹⁵.

As the visitor moves away from the Great Hall towards the rear of the building, one passes the segmented room of the “Living and Dying”¹⁶. Here, as before, the ceilings are also high and much of the space is open, giving freedom and distance to the room. “Living and Dying” label connotes an attribute of opposition and balance, transition, and a distinct separation from the previous space. At the rear of the room of “Living and Dying”, one can observe a stairway going up towards a statue of the Buddha denoting “the awakened one”, as well as sign pointing downward which leads to the “Islamic World”¹⁷. Here again, positioning, labeling and design serve to disperse power away from this area. The “Islamic World” is separated from the “Great Court”, positioned at the rear of the building and at a lower level, connoting lesser importance. The “Islamic World” room is designed to be narrow, due its low ceilings and is dense with cases and items, taking away from the visual grandeur seen in the “Great Court”, “Ancient Egypt”, “Enlightenment”, and “Asia”. Even the gift shop has at least double the height of the “Islamic World” (see Appendix for photos). In all, technologies of design are utilized to shift focus and power to various segmented spaces in the building.

Knowledge-Power through Categorization

For Foucault, knowledge produces power and power produces knowledge. Bearing this in mind, one interesting feature of the museum map is the categorization of various spaces in the museum. As we have seen thus far, labels are effective in creating ideologies. Similarly such uses are present on the Museum map. Here, all the sections are named with noun phrases, which are perceptively more salient than other lexical categories¹⁸. Certain nouns are modified by the qualifier “Ancient” denoting a past and connoting that certain spaces have links to the past, whereas others do not. Greece and Rome, Egypt have such qualifiers, whereas “Middle East” does not. Certain nouns are modified by time period range and others do not. Lack of a range connotes a timelessness aspect to the area. Finally, the “Islamic World” label is placed under the category of the “Middle East”. Such a positioning serves to place 1.3 billion Muslims (the majority of whom live outside the Middle East) to this specific geographical area of the world. To support such a categorization, one could argue that Islam as faith has origins in the Middle-East. However, this argument is not sufficient, since other Abrahamic religions such as Christianity and Judaism also claim origin in this area, but do not such have an anchored association in the museum literature. Overall, such elements serve to construct a representation of truth that is inconsistent with the museum’s transcribed rhetoric of advancing the knowledge of the cultures that it represents.

The British museum declares that “The term Islamic World is used ...to define the culture of peoples living in lands where the dominant religion is Islam¹⁹”. But such a position has consequences. Amartya Sen argues that creating categories such as “Islamic World” or “Hindu World” and achieves more harm than good. In his book, *Identity and Violence*, Sen posits that the “Civilization or religious partitioning of the world population yields a solitarist approach to human identity, which sees human being as members of exactly one group...A solitarist approach can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world...In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups---we belong to all of them. The same person can be , without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal , a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist²⁰ and so on. By creating an “Islamic World” category, the British museum seems to endorse the “solitarist approach” to human identity and promotes such a view to more the 5 million visitors a year, most of those who are international.

Biography and Representation of Objects

Next, I would like to examine and compare elements in two different spaces: the exhibit of “The Islamic World” and “The Enlightenment” gallery. The goal is not only to investigate some specific objects, but also to explore the knowledge (e.g. historical, contextual) that has been selected and anchored to these objects, as well as investigate the rhetoric and ideology that is constructed through the representation of the objects.

The “Enlightenment” room is constructed with a high ceiling and tall displays of wooden shelves that surround the visitor. A message display is positioned at the entrance, which explains that the British Museum was founded in 1753 and that the objects in this room “help us to explore the passions and ideas of collectors and scholars at this time”. The massive room contains numerous items from many cultures, tacitly linking all of them to the “Enlightenment” Era. Take, for instance, case 23, whose label states, “Decorative pottery known as Isnik ware, including flasks, disk, jug and bowl, from Ottoman Turkey 16th-17 century AD”. The label informs the viewer that the usage of this object within its original context was not functional, but decorative. In terms of patrons, the visitor is not provided with the history of the item. Here, we are not informed how the Enlightenment “scholars” and “collectors” obtained this item. Moreover, it is not conveyed how the item was produced nor the name of the artist. What is most interesting is that similar ceramic pieces in the “Islamic World” galley are displayed to create quite a different effect and convey slightly different meanings. First of all, the room that contains the “Islamic World” has a low-ceiling, making the objects closer to eye level, connoting a more egalitarian ambience.

This is unlike the “Enlightenment” room, where one has to look up towards the ceramics on the highest shelves (which are barely visible). According to the museum’s displays, the Enlightenment is the time between 1680-1820 and the “Islamic World” connoting a culture from seventh century to present day (as span of more than 1400 years); yet the size of the rooms do not seem to match the time-spans nor the geography that these cultures encompassed in an equitable way. The Enlightenment room is at least twice the size of the “Islamic World” both horizontally and vertically, if not more. Here again, such differences in representation do not seem to synergize with the museum’s goal of advancing the understanding of the cultures they represent.



Figure 1: Enlightenment Room Case 23

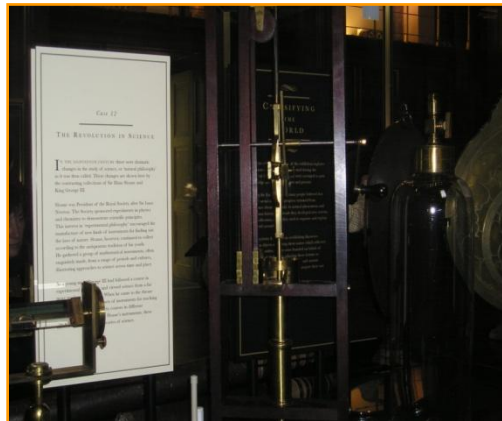


Figure 2: Revolution in Science

Another interesting comparison is that there are two separate displays containing astrolabes and various timekeeping devices in the Enlightenment Room. Both cases in the Enlightenment room are anchored with the label “The Revolution in Science”. The placement of one of these cases is in the center of the room, difficult to miss by the visitor. Neither label mentions the Muslim contribution to the development of this instrument. Yet interestingly enough, in the display of the case containing the astrolabe in the “Islamic World”, the label consigns recognition to “the Greeks” in the development of such a technology. The case in the “Islamic World” is approximately 5x4x8 containing astrolabes, timekeeping devices, celestial globes with “constellations and direction finding” devices. This tiny case is positioned in the corner of the room with the label: “Islamic Science”. However, the size of the case, the placement and the number of objects within the case do not do justice to adequately represent the vast contribution of Muslim individuals and communities including Arabs, Persians, Asians and Europeans towards “Science” for more than fourteen-hundred years of human history. Overall, such uses of representational technologies may disgustingly take away from the actual historical facts about the objects and their origin.

Geography, Subjectivity and Truth

The British Museum was instituted by an act of Parliament for the benefit of the nation. Yet today, the majority of more than 5 million visitors per year are not British citizens, but international guests²¹. This is articulated by the museum’s literature. The key point here is that the museum is not just influencing a portion of British citizens, but the citizens of the world at large. In addition to this, the geographic location of the museum also serves to support another *institutional apparatus* that seeks legitimacy of scientific or academic expertise. Proximity to prestigious universities provides the museum an air of science and truth. Such a knowledge/power positioning is significant for museums. Recent research in United States and Britain suggests that museums are seen as a reliable source of factual information.

For instance, in particular study, the American Association of Museums survey found that 87% of respondents considered museums trustworthy compared to 67% who trusted books and 50% who trust television news²². In the book: *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* by Richard Sandell (2007), the results of his study of a number of museums revealed that a large number of visitors perceive the museum as “unbiased” and “balanced”²³. And so, the truth represented by the museum, particularly this one, has a considerable capacity to recognize or misrecognize cultures, to educate or mislead millions of visitors in terms of what kinds of truth about cultures it seeks to convey.

The Power to Resist

As I mentioned in my introduction, the British Museum literature articulates a pedagogical motive where the institution seeks “to advance understanding of the cultures” it represents²⁴ and that “its collections belonged to the nation, and admission was free and open to all.” Yet, as we have seen, the objects in the museum do not exist in a vacuum and various technologies of representation such as space, architecture, labels and positioning are used to construct a representation that can carry ideological meaning. The knowledge-power relations within the discourse of the museum are not always congruent with this rhetoric. As stated previously, within the discourse there are illusive goals and rationalities at play that are difficult to isolate. With that said, the purpose of such an analysis is not to reveal intentionality or that museums have a nefarious aim, but rather to describe the effects of power. Often it is the case that institutions are constrained by dynamics such as socialization, where ways of seeing the world are not questioned. They are also bound by economic, logistical and political constraints. With that said, legitimate authority implies responsibility and such a responsibility cannot be abdicated, especially when one is aware that the average museum visitor sees the museum not a place of performance or a conduit of a specific view of the world, but rather as an “unbiased” presenter of facts and history. In any space, the equality of power is difficult to fathom; however, analytical diligence can provide one in a Foucauldian sense with the power to resist or pierce the ideology that is constructed by a particular discourse. Furthermore, Museums could show greater congruence with their articulated messages, if they work harder to appropriate a more critical and interactive approach to representation where the visitor is not just a passive recipient of the Museum’s truth.

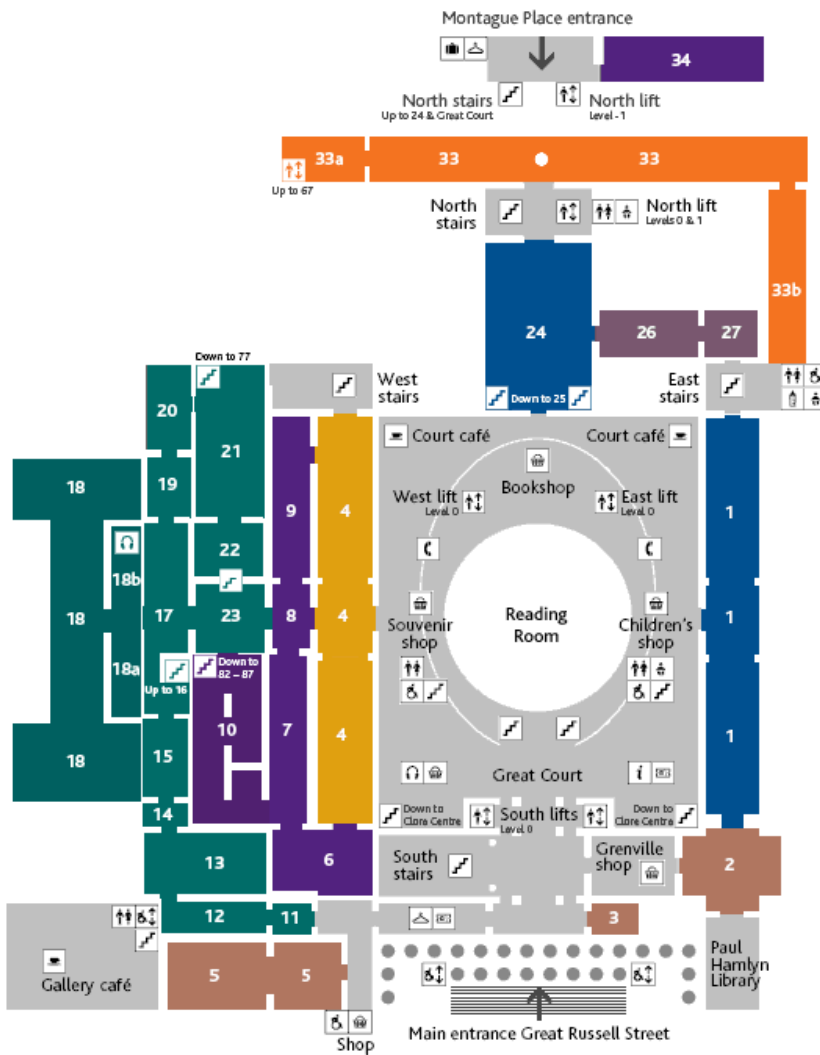
References

- 1 Duncan, Carol. Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship. Exhibiting Cultures, the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display. Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Steven D. Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1990. Pg88.
- 2 [Appendix]: The British Museum Map.
- 3 Bennett, Tony, The Political Rationality of the Museum. 1990
<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/3.1/Bennett.html>
- 4 Rose, Gillian, Visual Methodologies. London: Sage Publications, 2007. Pg174.
- 5 The British Museum Map/Floor-plan is attached at in the Appendix.
<http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/floor_plans_and_galleries/ground_floor.aspx>
- 6 Rose, Gillian, Visual Methodologies. London: Sage Publications, 2007. Pg165.
- 7 By ideology we mean knowledge that is constructed in such a way that to legitimate unequal social power relations.
- 8 Rose, Gillian, Visual Methodologies. London: Sage Publications, 2007. Pg142.
- 9 Please See Appendix for British Museum Map.
- 10 Term by Roland Barthes (1915-1980) to mean breaking down the text into small units of sense, or "lexias" for analysis
- 11 History - British Museum. <<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/history.html>>
- 12 See Photo in Appendix
- 13 Genesis 11
- 14 Foucault, Michel. Discipline & Punish. NY: Vintage Books, 1995. pp. 195-228.
- 15 Bennett, Tony. The Birth of the Museum. Routledge, 1995. Pp. 89.
- 16 See Photo in Appendix
- 17 See Photo in Appendix
- 18 Smith, Jennifer L. Noun Faithfulness: On the privileged behavior of nouns. University of Massachusetts, Amherst: n.p., May 21, 1997. Section 4 and references cited therein.

- 19 British Museum
website.<http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/middle_east/room_34_the_islamic_world.aspx>
- 20 Sen, Amartya. Identity and Violence. Penguin Books, 2006. pp. Xii.
- 21 Smith, Rupert. The Museum (Behind the scenes at the British Museum. BBC Books. 2007. pp 18
- 22 Sandell, Richard. Museums, prejudice and the reframing of difference. Routledge, London, 2007. pp. 127
- 23 Ibid, pp. 132.
- 24 [Appendix]: The British Museum Map.

* All photographs taken by Malik Ajani

Appendix Taken from “British Museum Map”



Taken from “British Museum Map”

Americas

- 26 North America
The JP Morgan Chase Gallery
- 27 Mexico

Ancient Egypt

- 4 Egyptian sculpture

Ancient Greece and Rome

- 11 Greece: Cycladic Islands
- 12 Greece: Minoans and Mycenaeans
The Arthur I Fleischman Gallery
- 13 Greece 1050-520 BC
- 14 Greek vases
- 15 Athens and Lycia
- 16 Greece: Bassae Sculptures
- 17 Nereid Monument
- 18 Greece: Parthenon
- 19 Greece: Athens
- 20 Greeks and Lycians 400- 325 BC
- 21 Mausoleum of Halikarnassos
- 22 The world of Alexander
- 23 Greek and Roman sculpture

Asia

- 33 China, India, South Asia and Southeast Asia
The Joseph E Hotung Gallery
- 33a India: Amaravati
The Asahi Shimbun Gallery
- 33b Chinese jade
The Selwyn and Ellie Alleyne Gallery
- 67 Korea
The Korea Foundation Gallery

Middle East

- 6 Assyrian sculpture and Balawat Gates
- 7-8 Assyria: Nimrud
- 9 Assyria: Nineveh
- 10 Assyria: Lion hunts, Siege of Lachish and Khorsabad
- 34 The Islamic world
The John Addis Gallery

Themes

- 1 Enlightenment
- 24 Living and Dying
The Wellcome Trust Gallery

Exhibitions and changing displays

- Reading Room *The First Emperor*
- 2 Special exhibitions
- 3 Special exhibitions

Item 1 “Great Court”



Item 2 “Ancient Egypt” space



3 “Enlightenment “ space



Item 4 “Living and Dying”



Item 5 From “Living and Dying” to a downward path that leads to “Islamic World” up to the Buddha.



Item 6 “Islamic World”



Item 7 Grenville [Gifts shop]



“Enlightenment” Room



Inside “Islamic World”. The “Islamic Science” display.

