

# Should Museums Be Activists?

-- A critical analysis of the evolving social role of museums

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**Abstract:** This study critically explores the evolving role of museums as active agents in the fields of cultural heritage and social justice. Traditionally, museums have been seen as neutral repositories of history and culture. However, a greater awareness of social injustice and the demand for inclusivity have driven some museums to take a more active role in advocating for social change. This study combines arguments for and against museums adopting radical stances. Proponents believe that museums, as educational and cultural institutions, have the capability to promote social justice, foster cross-cultural understanding, and challenge societal prejudices. Conversely, critics argue that activism may compromise the perceived neutrality of museums and lead to biases that could alienate parts of the public and jeopardize funding sources. By integrating case studies and scholarly literature, this research discusses how museums can balance their educational missions with activist roles, promoting a more inclusive approach to museum management that addresses contemporary social challenges.

**Keywords:** Museum Studies; Museum Activism; Community Engagement; Cultural Heritage; Museum Ethics; Cultural Policy.

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## 1. Introduction

As society evolves, many museums have transitioned from being mere protectors and exhibitors of artifacts to becoming active participants in contemporary social issues. The concept of the "activist museum" emerged from this role shift, utilizing the museum platform to engage in and promote human rights, equality, and social justice [1]. Activist museums curate narratives that differ from traditional ones, focus on the perspectives of marginalized groups, and aim to influence public opinion and policy making to foster a more inclusive and equitable society [2].

Among scholars, curators, and the public, whether museums should be activist is a topic that needs dialectical consideration. Proponents argue that museums are agents of social change, particularly in promoting cross cultural understanding, addressing prejudices, and fostering respect for differences. Museums are not just neutral repositories of objects but are powerful institutions that shape audience understanding through exhibits and interpretations [3]. They play a crucial role in raising awareness, promoting social justice, and driving public engagement. On the other hand, opponents contend that if museums adopt activist stances, they might compromise their neutrality and objectivity as educators of history. They argue that activism could cause political bias, alienate certain visitors and affect funding sources.

This study critically discusses whether museums should be activist. It will cover relevant academic literature and case studies. The essay will first explain the social context of activist museums' emergence. Then, using specific case studies, it will explore arguments for and against museums adopting activist roles. Finally, this essay looks ahead to how future practices in the museum industry should navigate the complex relationship between cultural management and social responsibility, and the considerations museums should take into account when adopting an activist stance to express viewpoints.

## 2. Social Background of Activist Museums

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Activist museums are institutions that use the museum platform to actively advocate for social justice and human rights [4]. Unlike museums that primarily focus on artifact preservation and display, the goal of activist museums is to influence public opinion and promote social change [2]. Activist museums curate exhibitions and events to address contemporary issues such as racism, gender inequality, climate change, and colonial legacies.

In recent decades, globalization and increased social awareness have promoted the evolution of museums into venues for advocacy. Museums are increasingly confident in proclaiming themselves as agents of social change, particularly in promoting cross cultural understanding, addressing bias and intolerance, and fostering respect for differences [2]. They influence society's perceptions and attitudes towards diversity by showcasing specific cultures and knowledge systems. Social media, born in the internet age, has played a significant role in this transformation by providing a platform for the public and marginalized groups to amplify their voices. The public now expects museums to take a stand on social issues. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and climate activism also emphasize the

necessity of museums as institutions that support and advocate for justice and equality [2].

Another significant influence is the increased awareness of the moral responsibility of museums. Many scholars reckon that museums have a duty to address historical injustices, such as colonial exploitation and cultural appropriation [5]. The shift towards activism has also received support within the museum industry, with many institutions now emphasizing community engagement and ethical considerations in their work. More and more museums are being used to understand and discuss pressing social issues [1]. The concept of the activist museum has developed in response to broader social changes and the demands of various groups for museums to play an active role in advocating for social justice and addressing the concerns of marginalized groups [6].

### 3. Positive Aspects of Museums being Activist

#### 3.1. Page Numbers Promoting Social Justice

Museums can actively engage with contemporary social

injustices and amplify the voices of marginalized communities, which allows them to play a crucial role in promoting social justice. By taking an active stance, museums can serve as major platforms for education, dialogue, and driving social reform to advance social justice.

The Modern Slavery Museum in Houston, Texas, addresses the widespread issue of human trafficking through its exhibitions and events, impacting millions of people worldwide. The museum's exhibits inform visitors about the realities of modern slavery, including forced labor, sex trafficking, and child exploitation [1]. By hosting these exhibitions, the museum engages visitors in the difficult and unsettling narratives of human trafficking, guiding them through a journey that reveals the harsh realities faced by modern slavery victims. The museum's emphasis on these issues raises awareness and vigilance, encouraging visitors to reflect on their roles and responsibilities in combating these injustices. This connection and engagement foster a sense of involvement in the fight against human rights violations.



Figure 1. One of 17 Sex Rooms in a Cantina Brothel

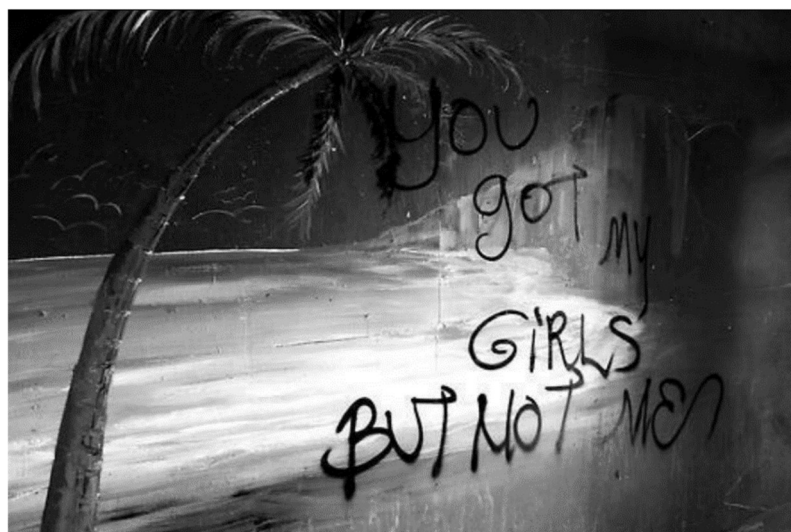


Figure 2. Message in a Cantina Left by Trafficker

Hosting impactful and provocative exhibitions is one of the primary ways the Modern Slavery Museum promotes social justice. These exhibitions are designed not only to display

artifacts but also to challenge visitors' perceptions and inspire them to take action, thus fulfilling the role of an activist museum. The museum provides a powerful impact on visitors

with replicated sex rooms and victim testimonies. The sex rooms recreate the environments where sex trafficking victims are often held [1], helping visitors understand the real conditions these victims face, creating a strong emotional impact. The testimonies of human trafficking survivors offer a personal perspective on the trauma and challenges victims face [1]. These vivid accounts humanize the statistics, fostering empathy by making the victims' suffering more relatable and highlighting the urgency of the issue for visitors. By being an activist institution, the Modern Slavery Museum actively promotes social justice and drives meaningful change in society.

### 3.2. Increasing Public Engagement

Activist museums need to foster connections and understanding between different groups to address social issues, promoting community engagement. They highlight the experiences of marginalized communities through curation [7] and encourage public participation and dialogue.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City primarily tells the stories of immigrants who lived at 97 Orchard Street, describing their struggles and contributions to American society. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum attracts a diverse audience by showcasing multicultural and immigrant histories, such as those of German Jews, Italian Catholics, and Eastern European Jews [8]. This multicultural display not only deepens visitors' understanding of immigrant history but also enhances their engagement through interactive exhibitions.



**Figure 3.** This photograph displays the living conditions during the Hard Times.

These two examples demonstrate that museums being activist can promote social justice and enhance public engagement. From the Modern Slavery Museum in Houston exposing the harsh realities of human trafficking to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York deepening public understanding of immigrant history through multicultural exhibits, these institutions use radical displays and interactive education to enhance emotional resonance and social responsibility among their audiences, fostering cross cultural understanding. By showcasing and discussing the stories and challenges of marginalized groups, they effectively raise public awareness and prompt action against social injustices. Therefore, as activist institutions, museums play a positive role in promoting social justice and public engagement while

The museum's Shop Life exhibition collaborates with scholars from various fields, including immigration history, urban life, and political science [8], to ensure the accuracy and depth of the displayed content. Historical artifacts and related stories are presented through multimedia touchscreens, allowing visitors to engage hands-on, which not only sparks interest but also enhances educational interactivity. The museum's walking tours, such as Storefront Stories and Foods of the Lower East Side, [8] introduce local history and culture, fostering interaction and communication among community members. This interactive educational approach not only attracts more visitors but also promotes a deeper understanding of the exhibition content.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum's Hard Times tour explores how immigrants adapted and resisted during economic hardships by showcasing the lives of a German Jewish family from the late 19th to early 20th century and an Italian Catholic family during the Great Depression [8]. The exhibition provides an immersive experience for visitors through realistic reconstructions of immigrants' work environments and detailed displays of their household lives, allowing them to feel the immigrants' daily realities. Additionally, the museum uses participatory methods such as role-playing [8] to provoke visitors' reflections on social issues. This multicultural display and public dialogue platform demonstrate that museums can be activist and non-neutral institutions, highlighting the experiences of marginalized communities and fostering public engagement.

fulfilling their missions of historical education and cultural preservation.

## 4. Negative Aspects of Museums being Activist

### 4.1. The Risk of Political Prejudice

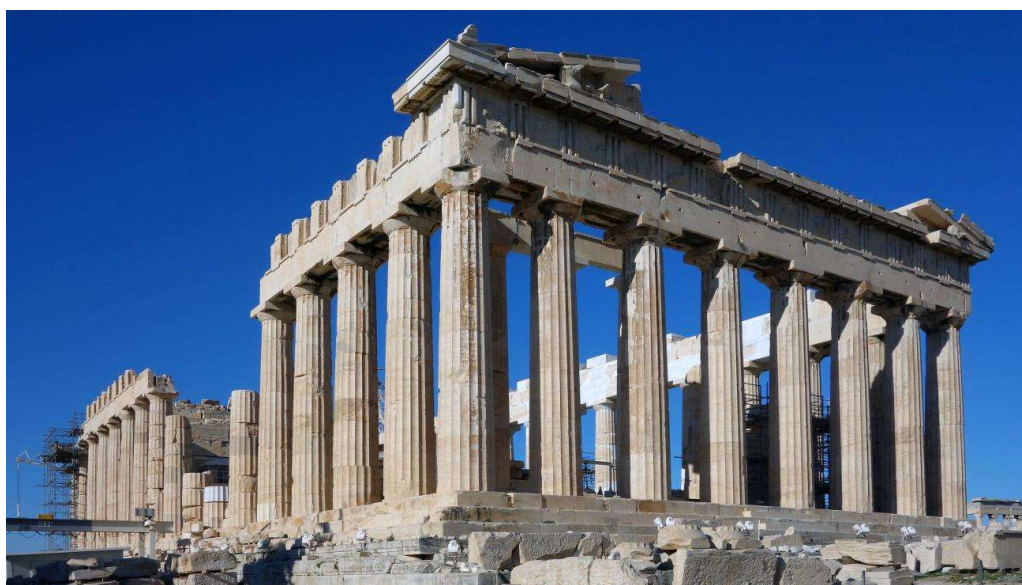
When museums take on activist roles and adopt certain stances, they risk being criticized and perceived as politically biased. This perception can diminish public trust in their role as educational institutions, and some audiences might view the museums' activist actions as unjust or unfair. In other words, being activist can affect their relationships with different groups.

The controversy over the British Museum and the Elgin Marbles illustrates the accusations of political bias that can arise when museums are seen as non-neutral spaces. Despite repeated requests from the Greek government, the British Museum has refused to return them to their place of origin [9]. Additionally, the cleaning of the Parthenon Marbles in London during the 1930s is considered to have been too aggressive, resulting in the loss of some sculptural details [9]. The British Museum's decision to retain the Elgin Marbles is viewed by opponents as a continuation of colonialist and imperialist policies [10]. This non-neutral stance has led to accusations of the museum engaging in cultural imperialism. The Greek side argues that the British Museum's position disregards modern standards of cultural heritage and restitution ethics, indicating a political bias towards

preserving British historical narratives rather than adhering to the new global consensus on cultural restitution [10]. The British Museum's refusal is seen as a political stance aimed at upholding British prestige and aligning with nationalist sentiments. The museum's refusal to publicly engage in discussions about restitution has also been internationally criticized for lacking transparency and openness [10], qualities expected of modern educational and cultural institutions. The British Museum's legal argument is that the acquisition of the marbles was legal under the laws at that time [9], which conflicts with current international views on ethical restitution. This discrepancy highlights a potential bias in prioritizing historical legal status over modern ethical considerations, seen as a politically conservative stance aimed at maintaining the status quo.



**Figure 4.** A section of the north frieze of the Parthenon Temple.



**Figure 5.** The current state of the Parthenon Temple.

The ongoing controversy not only alienates the Greek side but also international visitors who support cultural restitution, affecting the museum's international reputation. When a museum's stance and decisions reflect outdated or unjust political views, engagement declines. If museums take a non-

neutral stance, it can provoke public protests and calls for action, disrupting the experiences of other visitors and affecting the museum's ability to fulfill its mission. Therefore, in some cases, museums need to maintain a subtle balance between activism and neutrality.

## 4.2. Impact on Museum Funding

When museums act as activists rather than neutral institutions, taking a stance can attract support from individuals or organizations with similar views but may also result in the loss of funding from sponsors who hold opposite positions or are unwilling to be associated with certain political or social issues.

In 1999, the Brooklyn Museum hosted an exhibition called "Sensation," which sparked widespread public discussion due to its provocative and controversial content. It also led to threats from New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani to withdraw municipal funding for the museum [11].

The Brooklyn Museum's *Sensation* exhibition was intensely visual and emotionally impactful, potentially causing shock, nausea, panic, and anxiety among viewers. Some works in the exhibition were highly controversial, such as Marcus Harvey's portrait of child murderer Myra Hindley made using children's handprints, Damien Hirst's decaying

cow head with live flies, and most notably, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which utilized elephant dung and collage materials [11]. This painting sparked significant controversy, particularly among religious conservatives who found it to be a disrespectful depiction of a religious symbol.

The exhibition not only ignited fierce debates in the art world but also attracted widespread social attention. New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani was a strong critic of the exhibit, believing that the blasphemous portrayal of religious subjects violated principles for government funded art. He threatened to withdraw municipal funding from the museum and even attempted to use legal means to force the museum to alter its content or replace its management [11]. Groups supporting freedom of speech and artistic expression, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), backed the museum's stance, arguing that the government's actions constituted an infringement on the freedom of artistic expression [11].



Figure 6. Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*.

Although a federal court ultimately dismissed Rudy Giuliani's claims and ordered the city government to return the withheld funds, the incident clearly illustrates that museums acting as activists can indeed impact their funding sources due to their radical exhibitions or stances. Controversial content exhibited by museums acting as activists can significantly affect political, legal, and public reactions, potentially leading to negative impacts on funding sources. Museums need to carefully consider their positions and expressions.

## 5. Conclusion

The discussion on whether museums should play the role of activists is a marker of societal progress. Museums, as institutions trusted by the public, hold an important and unique position in society and have the ability to influence cultural and social perceptions.

Museums acting as activists have a positive impact on promoting social justice and enhancing public engagement. The Modern Slavery Museum in Houston educates visitors about the history of human trafficking through replicated environments and survivor testimonies, encouraging people to take action against injustices and promote social justice.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York uses interactive exhibits to help visitors understand the realities of immigrant life, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy for marginalized groups and promoting cross-cultural dialogue and social participation. Activist museums educate and motivate action on contemporary issues from a non-absolutely neutral standpoint while fostering meaningful dialogue within the community.

Museums adopting an activist stance can also face various issues, including being perceived as having potential political bias, which could damage their educational mission. It might also anger some sponsors, harming the sources of funding for museum operations. The British Museum's refusal to return the Elgin Marbles is viewed as politically biased, potentially alienating international stakeholders and damaging its credibility. The Brooklyn Museum's *Sensation* exhibition demonstrated how controversial exhibits can provoke political and religious opinions while also leading to financial risks.

Although the discussion about whether museums should be activists is inconclusive, it can serve as a reference for future practices in the museum industry. Exploring the positive and negative impacts of museums as activists can reflect the complex interplay between cultural management and social

responsibility. In future practices, museums can define their roles clearly by establishing guidelines on how to engage with social issues or express positions, ensuring that these guidelines are inclusive and sensitive to different viewpoints. Sociological criticism points out that museums often represent cultures in a hierarchical manner, leading to oppressive and exclusionary consequences. Museums influence social values and power relations by displaying and communicating specific societal perspectives [2]. Therefore, Continuous dialogue between museums and various communities or groups is also necessary, as obtaining narratives from different perspectives helps museums express views more comprehensively.

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