

Museums Matter

Soft power

Soft power is the influence achieved through activities which are not formally organised by governments. Exercising soft power is to communicate with a larger audience and seek attitudinal change over a longer period of time, and is more important than ever in an increasingly digitally connected world. Areas of the world with rapid economic, social and political change are now more familiar and visible to a UK audience and vice versa; making the UK public more curious about their culture, history and heritage, yet also making the world more curious about UK history, culture and heritage. A positive view of the UK increases trust, which is a powerful diplomatic and economic tool. The UK has the greatest soft power capability in the world.¹

DIPLOMACY

The international work of museums makes a major contribution to the UK's soft power capability and influence overseas. It creates channels of communication, a positive impression of the UK and the conveying of different perspectives which may not be achieved through more conventional forms of diplomacy. The position of UK museums as working at arms-length from government allows them to create mutually beneficial relationships and build trust based on institutions' shared interests.

Many UK museums have long-held international links derived from the focus of their collections, their expertise, their audiences or their location. Loans, academic study, acquisitions, peer support, special exhibitions, research and staff exchanges all provide the means by which international links develop. The long-standing relationship between UK museums and their Russian counterparts demonstrates the ability of museums to maintain good working relationships when more formal channels of communication face challenges. The British Museum's loan Illissos (one of the Parthenon Sculptures) to the Hermitage to mark the Hermitage's 250th anniversary and the V&A's borrowing of objects from A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum in Moscow (both in 2014), and the Science Museum's 2015 exhibition *Cosmonauts*, produced in partnership with numerous Russian institutions, illustrate this.

The Fitzwilliam Museum's exhibition *Search for Immortality: Treasures of Han Tombs* (the largest ever loan of treasures from the Han tombs to a Western institution), the Ancient House in Thetford's work with Anglo-Indian Sikhs and Royal Museums Greenwich's research with communities in the Niger Delta demonstrate the breadth of museums' international relationships. Museums' international work both develops from and supports their work with local communities and the impact on domestic

UK audiences of international partnerships is significant, becoming part of museums' role in enabling visitors to explore the world around them.

DEVELOPMENT

Museums with international collections develop good relationships with source communities, to ensure objects are handled sensitively and a body of knowledge is developed in collaboration. Museums are uniquely able to present objects and exhibitions in a contemplative environment, allowing visitors to explore their own culture, history and identity, as well as those they see as "other". For these reasons museums can play a key role in post-conflict reconciliation and international development.

TRADE

Good but less formal relationships developed or sustained through cultural activity can create a positive context within which more formal trade relationships can flourish. The British Council reports *Trust Pays* and *Culture Means Business* demonstrate the hugely positive impact of cultural activity. The cultural relationship between the UK and the Gulf States, China, India and Korea are all hugely significant and necessary parts of wider bilateral relationships. Those reached by UK cultural activities are more likely to feel trust towards UK people, as well as being more likely to favour its education system and to do business with the UK. Brazilians with no family or other ties to the UK felt significantly more trust after experiencing the UK's cultural products.²



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¹ <http://softpower30.portland-communications.com/>

² *Trust Pays*, British Council, p.11