

# cultural identity and the municipal gallery: the re-imagining of bradford's collection as a transcultural representation of identity at cartwright hall 1904-2014

## AUTHORS:

Jemma Browne  
Nottingham Trent University (UK)

Ana Souto  
Nottingham Trent University (UK)

### Abstract

Museums have historically played an important role in the formation of cultural identities; they evolved in their current form in the late nineteenth century concurrent with the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere (Bennett, 1995). As cities have been spatially transformed through time by the layering of new and existing expressions of cultural identity, galleries and museums have struggled to retain their meaning as representational spaces. The municipal gallery at Cartwright Hall in Bradford presents a timely case study demonstrating how it ensured that its collection evolved to reflect the changing communities in the city and how, by re-imagining the idea of heritage, it has created a transcultural representation of identity.

**Keywords:** cultural identity, collective memory, empire, transcultural space

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## 1. Identity formation: museums and the public sphere

Museums and galleries are important cultural spaces within our cityscapes; they present unique opportunities to shape and represent multiple cultural identities, disseminating ideas and memory through both their exhibitions and the architectural form they take. This paper uses the example of Cartwright Hall to explore how museums have used multi-temporal strategies to communicate collective memory and represent cultural identities through time. Completed in 1904 to commemorate the city's industrialists and mark the opening of the Bradford's Great Exhibition. It is now curated as a transcultural space (Macdonald, 2013), with tangible connections to Empire explored both explicitly and implicitly through the collections.

Bennett argues that through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, museums, galleries and exhibitions could be conceived of as an 'exhibitionary complex' (1995, p. 59); a set of linked sites which both encouraged and supported the dissemination of emerging knowledge, often in the form of new disciplines such as anthropology or psychology. The Foucauldian manner in which they were conceived of, promoted and sanctioned by municipal institutions suggests that they formed a discourse that can be associated with knowledge and power. He argues that there were three main strands to the development of these discursive elements; their development as social and public spaces, rather than the selective private institutions they had been previously, their transformation into spaces to use culture and knowledge for enlightenment, and a consideration of how the spatial organisations of museums might encourage new norms of public conduct. (1995, p. 23-25)

Until the Public Museum was established the general public had only been able to access material culture at fairs, theatres, exhibitions and tournaments. The new discourse was formed in the context of unequal means of engaging with material culture; associations with professional guilds, wealthy philanthropists, and political figures meant that through these codes of engagement, museums came to be part of the production of particular social realities. In the case of significant collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum or South Kensington Museum as it was first called and the British Museum this was achieved through historical acquisitions and enshrined a particular world view of Victorian Imperialism (Barringer, 1998, p. 11). Whereas smaller municipal collections such as Bradford's museums, evolved on a more ad hoc basis, relying heavily on bequeathed works of arts and loans from individuals, thus reflecting the particular tastes or interests of a few. Despite these differences, the development of the museum as a public space saw the sponsorship of particular exhibitions and display of symbolic artefacts contributing to the reproduction of a collective cultural identity as mythologised and upheld by what we can loosely call state-sanctioned informal coalitions of local power. The idea of the 'museum' emerged as a concept at the same time as the formation of nation states, and gave agency to the collecting of items deemed representative of national heritage and consequently cultural identity. The 'new spaces of representation' (p. 33 Bennett op cit.) became sites for the creation of 'three-dimensional identity stories for the public.' (Macdonald, 2013, p. 166)

Museum buildings also presented a new opportunity in the public sphere to convey meaning and identity through architectural styles, spatial arrangements, decoration and the use of allegorical imagery. Even minor municipal building used the classical styles revived in the Victorian and Edwardian periods to demonstrate Greek, Roman and Italianate forms and bring grace and order to the public sphere. The housing of cultural objects, paintings and sculptures within purpose built museums or galleries brought a further dimension to the Victorian urban landscape, enabling cultural values to be inscribed upon the city. The exterior could communicate the ideas and values of contemporary society and culture, cloaked in the Classical language of the ancient Greeks and Romans; whilst the interior would present mutable scenarios to disseminate cultural values of that time.

In Bradford, this was manifest in the grand Baroque façade of Cartwright Hall designed to convey a sense of civic monumentality. The allegorical sculptures on the domed tower (see fig. 1) represented values that reflected the cultural and mercantile identity of the city. On the upper part there are six figures representing Art, Literature, Music, Architecture, Sculpture and Drama, whilst four larger scaled figures at the base of the cupola depict Spinning; a woman holding a distaff, a figure depicting Commerce holds a model of a ship, signifying the global nature of trade and connectivity with other nations. In addition Fortitude and Abundance are symbolised on the North side, itself less prominent and perhaps signifying the central position that trade and industry played in creating the city and its cultural position. (Collections of Bradford Museums and Galleries, 1997)

Cartwright Hall was built on the former bequeathed estate of the Lister family, owners of Manningham Mills. This distinguishes it from many municipal buildings in the Victorian and Edwardian eras as most were sited within civic quarters forming boulevards or malls and creating new public spaces with memorials and monuments. The placing of monuments and public buildings within this new cityscape formed part of the narratives of national and regional power and has since been identified as a representation of Imperial Identity. (Driver & Gilbert 1999, Crinson, 2003, King 1990)

## 2. Memory and the spatial organisation of museums

Having established how the emergence of the museum created social spaces of enlightenment within the public sphere where social realities were communicated both through museum collections and displays and the buildings themselves; this paper argues that from this historical perspective museums become sites of memory.

Exhibitions articulate a form of collective memory through the display and curation of material culture as heritage. Assmann argues that through objectivised culture, such as buildings, texts and customs, memory becomes collective and it is culture that fixes collective memory as a form of shared identity; a group, or society can reproduce its identity through an understanding of shared knowledge. (1995, pp. 127-128) Pierre Nora makes similar spatial claims for memory; distinguishing between memory and history; memory is a group recollection whilst history is a construction or representation of the past, he argues that *sites of memory* (Lieux de Mémoire) are the spaces where collective memory can be articulated (1989).

The concept of Lieux de Mémoire in relation to Cartwright Hall can be applied to both the physical siting of the building and the principles underlying the display of the collections. There is a strong sense of temporality within the site, the tall chimney of Manningham Mill still has an overbearing presence in the area, connecting us implicitly with the Lister family's fortunes and reminding us that this was until quite recently also an industrial landscape. We can also recall other spatialities; the Great Exhibition of Bradford was held on this site to mark the opening of the Hall in 1904, itself an early staging of industrial fortitude positioning Bradford at the centre of an imperial culture. In its current manifestation, positioning itself a transcultural space, Cartwright Hall traverses the cultural memories and identities of the many communities in the city. It could be argued that this is accomplished through a curatorial strategy of layering multiple sites of memory. An examination of the viewer's phenomenological relationship with material objects will help to demonstrate how this can be achieved.

## 3. De-stabilising the temporal context: museums as sites of memory

By foregrounding the context of memory, Shelton suggests that in the process of curating an exhibition, objects are de- and re-temporalised. (op cit. p. 484) Removed from their context, the chronological relationship becomes secondary and we can re-imagine cultural objects within the context of memory rather than historical time. The viewer and object now exist within the moment, the object is no longer enveloped in an 'other' time and the opportunity for connections with collective or individual memory is more tangible. The Connect Galleries at Cartwright Hall are arranged on the thematic basis of People, Place and Imagination, which implicitly allows the fabric of collective memory to envelop the complete exhibition. By de-temporalizing paintings, sculptures and fine arts, they situate them in the present past (Macdonald, 2013, Butler, 2006), and the viewer connects with memory more readily. Presenting the connections with people or places, the collection stimulates the possibility of prompting memory (sometimes individual or familial, or sometimes collective) but often in the context of shared heritage.

## 4. Negotiating difference

Museums were important historically in the assemblage of people collectively, thus adding to the possibility of the formation of collective memory and identity which helped to make the idea of distinctive cultures more tangible and publicly accessible. (Macdonald, op cit. p. 166) The display of material culture elevated items giving them notoriety and significance; this is called the museum effect whereby museums create a two-fold dimension; the act of placing an object within a museum infers a special meaning, but also, paintings create a framework within which

Figure 1: The cupola at Cartwright Hall, seen from the South façade- Allegorical figures depicting civic values is positioned at its base. (source: author's own 2013)



the audience constructs meaning for their own life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991). Or as McClellan suggests, it 'raises the viewer above the plane of normal existence through contemplation of the ideal' (2008, p. 29). These examples all point towards the structure of experience and also suggest a way of understanding the role of museums in constructing a sense of [shared] cultural identity. Macdonald concludes that given the important role that museums played in the past in shaping identity through their contribution to collective understanding of material culture and the formation of spaces for 'objective' or distanced observation, they are now able to reflect more fluid ideas of identity formation and heritage. (ibid. p. 166)

## 5. The spatial negotiation of difference at Cartwright Hall connect galleries: a post-colonial collection?

The ways in which both 'South Asia' and 'locality' are evoked, then, are multi-perspectival and plural. In the galleries there is no attempt to arrange artefacts in terms of separate cultures; and nor is there a historical narrative. (Macdonald op cit. p. 179).

A progressive collecting strategy beginning in the late 1980's, has resulted in Bradford Museums and Galleries now holding the largest collection of South Asian art and material culture in the UK. The museum staff acknowledge the influence of post-colonial thinking in the curating and collecting philosophy behind the Transcultural and Connect galleries, but equally hold that whilst the work of Said, Bhabha and Spivak may have influenced them on an intellectual level, (Poovaya-Smith, 1997) the driving force behind the acquisition of South Asian art has been to reflect the cultural heritage of the settled migrant communities and to inform the wider community, (Misty, 2014). The areas of the collection embrace many facets of material culture reflecting the rich heritage of Bradford's communities; including gold, silverware, glass, fine art and fabrics. There is no clear cut reasoning determining how the collection developed in this way although it can be attributed to a number of progressive and proactive collaborations and collecting methods in the latter part of the twentieth century.

In an interview conducted by the author, the current International Art Collections Curator Nilesh Misty explained how Bradford Galleries and Museums were amalgamated in 1974; there was no active engagement with migrant communities from the Ukraine and Mirpur at that time. However, the Schools Learning Project had the forward thinking policy of travelling to the South Asian subcontinent and purchasing crafts and fabrics which they used on a loans basis to educate children about different cultures and faiths in the city. These items later became part of the gallery's collection, and whilst most held no intrinsic museological value, they reflected the rich material heritage of the settled communities. In 1983 the Director of Museums, Richard Hopper staged the first significant exhibition of South Asian art outside of London in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) called *Petals from a Lotus*. The exhibition contained many items from the V&A's India Collection and consequently attracted wide audiences from the South Asian Community, which up until this time had not visited Bradford galleries in any significant numbers. The exhibition was a landmark as the first in a series of collaborative events which culminated in the establishment of the *Transcultural Galleries*.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of the V&A it was a strategic attempt to think about communities beyond London, but Adams considers that the exhibition was also a move to re-focus discursive aspects of the V&A's collection towards where it came from, as opposed to how it came to be there. (2010, p.68) As was the case with a number of exhibitions that followed, such as *Calligraphy in the Muslim World* (1987) and *A Golden Treasury: Jewellery from the Indian Sub-continent* (1988)<sup>2</sup> significant loans were obtained from the V&A, the British Museum and Library and the Royal Collection (Misty, 2014, Poovaya Smith, 1997). These exhibitions are now considered to be the foundation of the collections strategy in Bradford. They served as both a consultative platform for different communities in Bradford and as widening participation events, attracting new audiences. However, whilst they were popular in representing aspects of the settled communities' material heritage their provenance seems to have been relatively unquestioned at the time.

There has been wide debate as to the claims of legitimacy of ownership of the collections of many of the British National Museums (Barringer, 1998, Adam, 2010) and it is now accepted that a significant proportion, as legacies of Empire have questionable provenance; however this dialogue does not seem to have been widely present in the curatorial decisions made during the 1980s and early 1990s. Pragmatism seems to have prevailed; as a provincial gallery it recognised the importance of representing the material heritage of their residents and providing opportunities to showcase such displays was perceived as prestigious and fell in line with the strategies to engage diverse populations (Collections of Bradford Museums and Galleries, 1997).

For the curatorial team at Cartwright Hall, the representation of a rich and multi-layered material heritage appears to be the primary aim. Poovaya Smith writes,

<sup>1</sup> These galleries were restructured in 2008 and became the Connect Galleries.

<sup>2</sup> The temporary exhibitions staged in the 1980s and 1990s were as follows: *Islamic Calligraphy* (1987), *A Golden Treasury*, (1988) *Earthen Shades: The Paintings of Shanti Panchal* (1989), *Manuscript Paintings from the Ramayana* (1989), *Warm, Rich and Fearless: An Exhibition of Sikh Art* (1991), *101 Saris from India* (1992), *Living Wood: South Indian Sculpture* (1992), *Worlds Beyond: Death and the Afterlife in Art* (1993), *An Intelligent Rebellion: Women Artists of Pakistan* (1994).

The decoding and deconstructing of various modes of thought such as Orientalism have been invaluable to a general understanding of structures of dominance and how these infiltrate and influence culture. Many aspects of this discourse are valid and applicable to the Bradford Collection, (...) but this is essentially a long term project (...) while reaffirming a deep respect for this discourse, [the gallery] temporarily sets it aside in order to let the public and the Bradford Collections develop their own momentum. (1997 p. 82, op cit)

However, whilst the overarching questions of where the collections sit within a post-colonial framework may not be explicitly addressed, many questions posed within the displays clearly sit within the post-colonial narrative. For example, the blurring of distinction between artefact and fine art addresses perceptions of art-makers and artists which could be said to be rooted within a colonial paternalistic idea of the *Other*. Similarly, whilst the Collection avowedly acknowledges its South Asian focus, the displays do not seek to valorise or privilege artists from any particular geographic locality, instead cutting across boundaries and making thematic connections. This philosophy was borne in part from an anxiety to avoid problematic demarcations traditionally found within the art establishment. Who, by seeking to identify and maintain discrete ethnically defined traditions, maintain the orientalist paradigm of the *Other*. For example, in 1996, Sotheby's previewed the auction *100 Years of Modern and Contemporary Indian Art* at Cartwright Hall. They included only artists who were living and working in India or Pakistan, excluding over 40 artists who were Indo-Pakistani by descent but living or working in Britain. Sotheby's, which sits at the epitome of the art establishment, was defining what it believed to be pure Indian Art; in doing so it was maintaining the imperial hegemony of partial representation of non-western culture. (Adam, 2010, p. 64) At this time, a debate had emerged regarding the relationship between Western and non-western artists in the Modernist cannon, centring upon the exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at New York's Museum of Modern Art (1984), which positioned tribal arts as secondary to Western Modern artists; valid as a source of inspiration, but intrinsically quotidian and craft based.

The Connect Galleries operate specific practices to unsettle this distinction. For example, the painting by Arpana Caur, *The Embroiderer* (1996) (fig. 2) is painted onto a traditional Mithila stylised folk painting. Despite Caur's notoriety, she is ranked within the top ten most well-known painters in India, the Gallery felt it was important to acknowledge the Mithila women who painted the backdrop before including it in the current display.

Figure 2: *The Embroiderer* by ARPANA CAUR (born 1954) [and the women of Mithila] (1996) Oil on Canvas 165 x 137.5 cm (by kind permission of The Collections of Bradford Museums and Galleries [CoBMG])



As with most of the exhibits, the painting can be read on many levels; displayed within the Place gallery, the female figure's association with fabric is a clear reference to Bradford's long association with the cloth trade. Similarly it is likely that the symbolism of the scissors, whilst referring in this instance to the Goddess of Destiny who cuts the thread of life, would have broad appeal across different audiences in Bradford. The Mithila painting tradition is a bounded art; practiced only in the Bahir region and mainly in two villages, Mithila and Madhubani, the mythological stories and painting techniques are handed down through generations bestowing a powerful sense of place.

## 6. Spatial organisation of the galleries

When the gallery was designed in 1904 it was intended that the spaces on the first floor would also be used for civic functions and the East Gallery was designed with American black walnut panelling which conveyed the sense of grandeur required for its use as a banqueting hall. (CoBMG, 1997) The current *Connect Galleries* occupy the entire first floor. There are five gallery spaces with additional passageways which incorporate the stone balcony looking over the sculpture hall. There is a strong sense of connectivity between all the spaces and between the ground and first floor; with long open views through the entire floor. The glazed domed atrium of the sculpture gallery can be

viewed from both the stone balcony and further back within the central gallery and is echoed by three sets of vaulted roof-lights. The sense of monumentality is further created by the two sets of coupled Corinthian columns, which support archways and mirror the pilasters articulating the outer curved wall of the sculpture gallery. The spatial harmony and fine quality materials including polished oak, marble, stone and moulded plasterwork communicate the wealth and culture of Bradford in the late 19th and early 20th Century.

Within this setting, the careful juxtapositioning of late 19th Century and Contemporary paintings creates a powerful dialogue across time. Analysing the arrangement of paintings, textiles and sculpture in the central vaulted hallway will give us a sense of the Connect Galleries overarching transcultural philosophy.



Figures 3 & 4: The grand central hallway on the first floor, holds the grouping of Fehr's marble statue of Dr. Cartwright (1904), with John Collier's portrait of Samuel Lister (1901) on the left, continuing the narrative of Textiles and Empire, Yinka Shonibare MBE's *The Wanderer* (2006) and *Dastarkhan* a 19th century fine floor cloth are displayed alongside.



Hanging on a side wall of the People gallery is a *Dastarkhan*, a 19th century, fine cotton block printed floor cloth from Machlipatnam Andhra Pradesh upon which food would have been served. The well-preserved cloth is coloured with vegetable dyes, tea and henna in reds, greens, fawns and black. The Persian couplets around the borders are blessings to the people eating and are translated in the catalogue as

O you the spreading out of whose table cloth is exalted and  
O you, of whose banquet of generosity is time (destiny) (p. 121, 1997 op cit)

This cloth has a powerful evocation of people being together through time; used objects or artefacts privilege memory in a way that fine art cannot. The couplets, particularly the second one, seem to speak directly to the painting of Samuel Lister, opposite, whom the people in Bradford still hold in high esteem for his generosity bequeathing the funds to create the Hall. The central hallway is dominated by the marble statue of Dr. Edmund Cartwright, (Henry Fehr, 1904). It has been suggested that Lister named the Hall after Cartwright, poet- clergyman and inventor to detract attention from the public and legal quarrel he had with Isaac Holden regarding the square motion wool combing machine, to which both claim to have owned the patents. (CoBMG, 1997, Burnley, cited in Heaton 1972) However, portrait painted by John Collier (1901) specifically commissioned for hanging in the gallery, Lister is proudly positioned seated next to the disputed combing machine. Behind him we can see timber panelling reminiscent of the American Walnut in the East Gallery, and his hand is placed in a proprietary manner on the machine; the painting seems to speak out to the viewer through time, you can feel my presence, in this moment- see all that I achieved.

It is therefore, all the more humbling to view the small sculptural piece by Yinka Shonibare MBE<sup>3</sup> *The Wanderer* (2006). The piece is a scaled model of a slave ship which made its voyage between Africa and Georgia in 1858, despite slavery having been outlawed at that time. During the journey, 80 of the 487 slaves on board died. Shonibare's inclusion here works both in the context of Bradford's legacy of textiles and empire, but also he is widely recognised for the construction of cultural and post-colonial identities as read across many of his artworks. (Hobbs, 2009, Kent, 2009, Downey, 2005, Sumartojo, 2013) Much of Shonibare's work is characterised by the colourful representational Dutch-African Batik fabrics he uses. Here on the sails of the ship, other works include three-dimensional tableaux which recreate paintings by significant European artists such as Fragonard's *The Swing* (1767) and Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr. & Mrs. Andrews* (c. 1750) in which witty scenes are created with headless figures clothed in the batiks, rich with symbols that poke fun at high culture. The provenance of the fabrics themselves construct the first signifier of hybrid identity (Kent, 2009, Hobbs, 2009, Perella 2001, Shonibare, 2004). At first we read the cloth as representing African identity particularly in the post-independence 1960's with the rise of Pan-African nationalism (p.12 Kent, op cit) although the patterns are actually inspired by Indonesian batik prints. However, they are Dutch fabrics (originally designed for an Indonesian colonial market in the 19th century), designed and produced in England and the Netherlands and bought at Brixton Market, London. Through the simple use of fabric, Shonibare begins to convey some of the complexities of postcolonial identity and the ways in which culture is spatially layered through time. The content of his work often attempts to deconstruct questions of representation, identity and belonging; *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (2001) is a photographic series; a black man (Shonibare) plays the lead role within a nineteenth century aristocratic setting (Shonibare/Downey 2005) and most recently the *The British Library* (2014) an

<sup>3</sup> Yinka Shonibare MBE uses the initials MBE after his name after he was awarded the Order in 2005 as a deliberate 'doubling' gesture acknowledging with irony that Britain is itself a postcolonial nation.

installation of 10,000 books covered in different varieties of his signature fabric, with each spine bearing the name of someone who has made a significant contributions to 'British' culture, who has an immigrant ancestry.

His works demonstrate a tendency to subvert the image or object by projecting new layers of meaning, forcing the viewer to confront uncomfortable realities of nation, history and identity. This suggests that the central positioning of *The Wanderer*, within the gallery makes a clear statement that the collection cannot be easily read as a historical jaunt through either British or South Asian contemporary art over the last century.

## 7. Museums as spatial representations of memory and identity

The Connect Galleries in Cartwright Hall demonstrate a meaningful approach to the representation of cultural identity in particular amongst migrant communities settled in the city. The innovative curatorial approach plays to the fluidity of cultural identity which cannot be universalised as found historically in museum settings. In the past, art and artefacts from former colonial settings were displayed with ethnographic dialogues set up between audience and displays. The galleries in Bradford suggest that whilst cultural identities evolve and change, there are shared threads which may be linked to both displacement and rootedness and that by thinking thematically through collective memory these questions can be examined. Conceiving of museums and galleries as sites of memory they can have a powerful impact both shaping and reflecting cultural identity. Cartwright Hall achieves this not only through its displays, but also in its architecture and its urban parkland setting with its strong sense of spatial memory. As Shelton (2006) argues, by de- and re-temporalising works of art, the audience is able to have a more immersive experience in the moment, rather than trying to access meaning within an abstracted historical time. The spatial organisation of the paintings is such that they also create a dialogue across time with one another adding to a sense of memory and place. The displays also serve to dislocate the viewer from a bounded geographical idea of space, by subverting the traditional groupings which used either temporal or locales as taxonomies, the audience is prompted to make new connections which represent a more fluid or layered sense of identity. By smoothing out difference rather than drawing attention to diversity, the galleries purposefully avoid exoticism and a sense of otherness through thematic groupings which emphasise connectivity and in doing so make fluid representations of diverse, but settled communities within Bradford.

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### Picture credits

Figure 3. *The Wanderer*, Yinka Shonibare MBE.

[www.mylearning.org/the-wanderer/p-3756/](http://www.mylearning.org/the-wanderer/p-3756/)

Photograph of the central hall by kind permission of The Collections of Bradford Museums (Author's own 2014).