

**What role do museums and art institutions play in international relations today and specifically in the development of what Joseph Nye called “soft power”? (Joseph Nye, *Soft Power the Means to Success in World Politics, Public Affairs: NY 2004*).**

Museums and art institutions have long been at the forefront of representing cultural values and morals, being utilized as locations of instruction for centuries. It is no wonder that in a world that is increasingly connected, these same institutions come to play their roles on international levels, and have increasingly been used in International Relations. They contribute to what Harvard professor and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Clinton Administration Joseph Nye terms *soft power*; the ability to persuade rather than coerce through elements of ‘hard’ power such as the threat of a strong military. It is made up of many different elements that, when combined efficiently, can be wielded to produce great positive effects for the governments that use them.

As *soft power* is comprised of many different elements, this essay will focus on two effects that it can have. On the one hand the use of the culture to keep doors open for political negotiations, which will be explained through the example of Iran’s loan of cultural artefacts to the British Museum, and on the other hand the creation and development of a favourable image on an international level, allowing for leverage in political discussions, which will be expounded upon through the *Picasso in Palestine* project. Through Nye’s theories on *soft power*, important notions concerning cultural diplomacy as set forth by John Holden, as well as thoughts on the possibilities for museums envisaged by Charles Esche, this essay will discuss the powerful impact art exchanges can have, and thus attempt to evaluate the role museums play in international relations and the development of *soft power* today.

Before examining the case studies however, some key terms must be discussed. Most importantly, there is ‘soft power’, a term coined by professor Joseph Nye, which refers to “the ability to shape the preferences of others” (Nye 2004, 5). It is the ability a country has to co-opt and persuade others instead of coercing them through purely military or economic strength; it is the capacity to *attract* relations by creating an image to which other nations can relate or respect. In Europe, Nye highlights art, literature, design and fashion as elements

that serve as assets that contribute to the countries' attractiveness, and that can be capitalized on in order to create positive images on a global scale. It is not merely a case of creating a certain image through use of popular culture or mass media, although it is claimed that the "fast adaptation of American popular culture by many Europeans after the Second World War certainly contributed positively to the democratization of these societies" (Nye 2004, 48). However, neither America's MTV and McDonalds, nor Blair's 'Cool Britannia' are sufficient resources with which to persuade other nations. *Soft power* predominantly relies on three resources: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)" (Nye 2008, 97). In Nye's view, a country increases its chances of developing favourable relations when it embodies and promotes values that can be universalized.

A core difficulty presented by *soft power* (one that arises in the above description) is its rather intangible nature; how *can* nations 'market' their values in order to co-opt and attract? Culture shapes the environment for policymaking, but does so indirectly, through a process that is slow and can take years to manifest (Nye, *Soft Power* 2004, 99). It is therefore necessary for actors – individual organizations and governments alike – to create environments, physical locations and situations where culture can be exhibited as well as exchanged. Of use here are three dimensions of public diplomacy listed by Nye: daily communications, strategic communication, and the development of lasting relationships with "key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, training... and access to media channels" (Nye, *Soft Power* 2004, 109). It is the appropriate combination of these three dimensions that creates a favourable image of a country and subsequently allows a country to acquire the result they desire.

For the purpose of this essay, the most important of the three aforementioned elements is strategic communication, outlined by Nye as a set of themes constructed in a similar manner to a (political) campaign, planning "symbolic events and communications over the course of a year to brand the

central themes, or to advance a particular government policy” (Nye, 108). Arts institutions have the capability to communicate cultural values to the rest of the world, often facilitated through government-affiliated institutions such as the British Council for the UK or the Alliance Francaise for France, which was purposely set up by the French government to repair the nation’s “shattered prestige” after defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (Nye 2008, 96). Closely intertwined however, is Nye’s third element of the development of long lasting relationships; the maintenance of relationships with key individuals as well as exchanges that allow large groups of the public to engage with aspects of a nation’s culture, for instance through museums exhibiting specific cultures (either foreign or their own), and by facilitating inter-museum loans.

This moves us on to the next question of how museums and art institutions have developed to embody their role in *soft power*. Over the past century their *intentional* utilization under the guise of international relations has undoubtedly risen, however museums have, historically, occupied instrumental roles in society; initially constituting private collections aimed at the enjoyment of the elites, progressively moving into the public domain in the nineteenth century. They were ascribed the function of “broadcasting the messages of power throughout society” (Bennett 1995, 61). By bringing together “significant ‘culture objects’, [museums] were readily appropriated as ‘national’ expressions of identity” (Macdonald 2003, 3). The construction of a national identity was subsequently cemented by the “construction of a radically different ‘Other’” (Bennett, 79). In short, large national museums were responsible for contributing to the formation of its citizen’s national identity, through the careful selection of artefacts deemed essential to the nations’ development, which could later be called upon in the form of patriotism or, at least, as a “moral and cultural regulation of the working classes” (Bennett, 73).

With this explanation in mind, it is plausible to claim that museums embody a sizable political element. It is important therefore, to acknowledge the observation by Christine Sylvester, professor in International Relations, that the advancements of the role of museums in the nineteenth century caused them to increasingly embody “internationally implicated/ socially situated social

institutions”, inevitably causing them to become institutions that are “heavily political” (Sylvester 2009, 3), ultimately allowing them to serve similar purposes on a global scale. As ‘memory institutions’ (Holden, et al. 2007, 16) they are physical manifestations of nations’ culture and heritage. Museums have the capacity to become symbols of entire cities and nations, becoming major sources of tourism. For instance, in the UK the Tate Modern welcomes over 5 million visitors per year, effectively making it one of the UK’s top three tourist attractions; the impressive size of the building causing it to become an iconic part of the city (Tate 2011). However, they also engage in cultural exchanges through exhibitions that showcase other cultures, organize temporary loans of art pieces to other institutions, and sometimes even set up international franchises, an example of which being the Guggenheim Foundation. Through internationally operating curators, biennials, and international art fairs, there are a multiplicity of opportunities for the exchange of art as well as platforms that promote discussion and the exchange of ideas. Running parallel to developments in telecommunications and trade in globalization, the art world too has become increasingly integrated as artists “lived in one country, worked in a second, and exhibited in yet another” (Bydler 2010, 381). These developments can be viewed positively, by focussing on increased global participation, or negatively when looking at the aspect of increased homogenization; however for the purpose of this essay it is most important to acknowledge that art institutions are simultaneously increasingly connected to their geographic location while also ever more operative on transnational levels, allowing them to occupy key positions in society, sending messages that trade figures and military forces may not.

With this knowledge in mind we can analyse specific cases where museums have, implicitly or explicitly, played a role in cultural diplomacy and thus contributed to the development of *soft power*, starting with an instance where it was evident how “At times of political difficulty... culture can keep doors open until relations improve” (Holden, et al., 54). As explained, culture can provide a positive atmosphere in which political statements can be made; museums provide a space where “work and pleasure can coexist” (Holden, et al., 53). One

such occasion was when international tensions affected diplomatic relations between Iran and the UK, but were mediated in part by the British Museum's exhibition *Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia*, which took place in 2005.

It is important here to first mention the historical significance of the British Museum, which, according to its website, is the oldest national public museum in the world, granting "free admission to all 'studious and curious persons'", since the mid-eighteenth century (The British Museum 2011). As a longstanding institution with one of the world's largest collections of artefacts it is a perfect example of Holden's 'memory institutions'; which is precisely what allows it to have obtained great political diplomatic strength and explains why it is of great value to British cultural diplomacy. The museum has, from as early as the nineteenth century, during Britain's imperial century, been involved with excavations in locations including the Middle East. During these excavations a wealth of discoveries were made, resulting in vast collections; one of which is the Assyrian collection which has been instrumental to the understanding of 'cuneiform', an ancient Middle Eastern script. In recognition of its importance, the British Museum has designated sixteen rooms dedicated entirely to Islamic and Middle Eastern art in order to showcase these to the world. The effects of hosting an exhibition of this nature are twofold; on the one hand, to use Bennett's phrase, it broadcasts a message of power to society through the sheer impressiveness of the exhibition that is visited by a very international public, while on the other hand also operating as a manifestation of an implied nationwide appreciation for foreign art, demonstrating a cultural value that is likely to be welcomed by foreign countries<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously however, the exhibition also represents a source of contestation; the British Museum has often been involved with arguments involving other countries' national heritage. For instance, during the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lord Elgin transported ancient sculpture (now known as the Elgin Marbles) from the Parthenon in Athens to London. As they have now been at the museum for over 200 years, the museum contends that they have become "historically rooted", causing debates that have continued for years as to whose

In addition to their permanent collection, the British Museum hosted *Forgotten Empire: the World of Ancient Persia*, which included art loaned by several museums: Paris' Musée du Louvre, and, most importantly, two Iranian museums, the National Museum in Tehran, and the Persepolis Museum. The exhibition, which later travelled to Barcelona and Japan, was held at a time when there were international political tensions concerning Iran's nuclear program after the newly installed Ahmadinejad pledged an "irreversible resumption of [uranium] enrichment" (BBC 2005). Unlike a later exhibition held at New York's Metropolitan Museum, of which the main aim was to "promote 'mutual understanding and education'" (Higgins 2011), the outward aim of the British Museum was to showcase one of the earliest empires that has been largely forgotten in the Western world, reminding us of the pedagogical function of museums as discussed by Bennett. However as the exhibition concerned pre-Islamic art and concerned a geographical area that was under international scrutiny, it had an underlying political significance. This was recognized by the museum's director, Neil MacGregor, in the foreword of the exhibition catalogue, noting that "In its acknowledgement of cultural differences within one coherent and effective state, it is perhaps more than ever a proper object of admiration and study" (Seymour 2006), thereby showing his awareness of political parallels that could be drawn in the exchange, making direct references to tensions both within the UK as well as internationally.

The greatest significance of the loan however, lies in the museum's very collaboration with the Iranian government. It was the first time many of the artefacts were outside Iran (Seymour), symbolic of the unique relations that the British Museum had managed to secure with their Iranian counterparts; relations that were further strengthened by the museum's promise to loan the Cyrus Cylinder, an object of great importance to Iran, in return. Illustrative of the positive influence this exchange had, was the fact that the Iranian vice president was able to share the stage with the then British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Jack Straw, "something that would have been unthinkable in any other

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cultural property they are, to an extent affecting the country's views of each other (Beard, 2011).

forum” (Holden, et al., 55). Holden jokingly adds, “Our cultural institutions appear to generate more trust on the part of Iran than does the BBC”. It is illustrative of how culture “can be used as a forum for unofficial political relationship-building” (Holden, et al., 53), and a clear example of a positive role realized by a museum in the development of the UK’s *soft power*.

The ties made were tenuous however, which became evident when the British Museum seemingly became hesitant about their promise to loan the Cyrus Cylinder in return. According to the deal, the cylinder was supposed to arrive in Iran in September 2009, however at this time there were allegations that the recent elections in Iran had been rigged, with the result of many protesters being out on the streets. In the eyes of the British Museum, this created an unsafe atmosphere for the exchange, and issued a statement that claimed they were monitoring the Iranian political situation “to make sure the loan was made in the best possible conditions” (Sheikholeslami 2009). The British Museum’s hesitation caused the Iranian government to threaten to ‘sever all cultural relations’ (Wilson 2010), accusing MacGregor of ‘wasting time’ and ‘making excuses’. Relations were then strained even further when the loan was delayed again after two clay fragments apparently related to the cylinder were discovered, requiring at least six months more time to be studied. The tension that this put on the relationship between the two countries was especially serious as MacGregor was, at the time, “the sole conduit of bilateral exchange” (Wilson). The fact that the museum was the only remaining avenue for diplomatic relations highlights the power this institution has; when the Cyrus Cylinder finally *was* loaned to Iran<sup>2</sup>, it provided an impetus to slowly resume other discussions; supporting Holden’s statement that culture can keep doors open when diplomats are unable to sit around a negotiating table. Baroness Helena Kennedy, a trustee of the British Museum, added to this that ‘to present this particular temporary gift to the people of Iran at this particular time is an act of faith which will have profound meaning and value” (Black and Dehghan 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> This in turn, was an entire issue in itself, similar to the case of the Elgin Marbles discussed earlier. When the cylinder arrived, several people within Iran voiced the opinion that it was rightfully theirs, and that the British government had essentially stolen it (Black and Dehghan 2010).

The loan is a reminder that the power of UK's display of respect and engagement with Iran's culture can not be underestimated, whether or not the decision to go through with the loan was intentionally part of the UK's strategic communication policies. It furthermore forms an excellent example of the implicit role museums are able to play in international relations; the 'act of faith' affects the UK's power to co-opt, thereby enhancing the nation's soft power.

Enhancing a nation's *soft power* can also be achieved through the exchange of objects that are not necessarily related to heritage but that instead are of a more symbolic sort. Here it is important to restate the fact that museums can occupy educational roles in society, furthermore providing platforms for discussion. The British curator Charles Esche adds another dimension to this, by advocating for using art to envisage possibilities, calling for art to be "a permissive and imaginative space for expressing individual and collective desires that could not be accommodated... within current political discourses" (Esche 2004). A project that brings the notion of co-opting together with that of imagining alternate possibilities is the *Picasso in Palestine* project.

The project took place in late June 2011, when the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, loaned Picasso's *Buste de Femme* (1943), valued at \$7 million, the most valuable piece to ever be shown in Palestine, to the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP). This was the first time an original Picasso would be displayed here, and was selected by school's students in conjunction with the director, Khalid Hourani. It forms the centrepiece for the *Picasso in Palestine* exhibit in Palestine, which aimed to introduce Western Art to Palestinians, and is described in the Van Abbemuseum's press release as being one of the most pronounced examples of Picasso' expressionist period, painted during the time in which he spoke against Spain's Civil War. Hourani felt that the success of this project would "create a sense of 'normality'" (Bouadi 2011); if a Picasso were able to go to Palestine, it would place the region on the international art map. The exchange was initially a 'simple' loan request, however bureaucratic and security issues caused the negotiations to take two years before an arrangement could be made, causing those involved to go through "all the political complications" (Daraghmeh 2011), and in fact legal,



artistic and official procedures for international art transport had to be reviewed for it to finally take place.

The fact that the exchange occurred successfully is, in itself, a sign of favourable diplomatic relations between the Netherlands, Palestine *and* Israel, however further significance can be ascribed to it. Van Abbemuseum's press release suggests that through this work, we might be able to "talk about and imagine conditions in relation to cultural rights and struggles in other places and times too" (Van Abbemuseum 2011). It is perhaps no coincidence that the Van Abbemuseum's director is Charles Esche, who incidentally also was a main curator for *Riwaq Biennial* in Ramallah in 2007. He stated that *Picasso in Palestine* "is part of a wider development in which a typical modern art collection tries to come to terms with the social and cultural changes taking place around us" (Van Abbemuseum 2011). He points towards European art playing a "meaningful role in helping to understand our global condition with all its internal contradictions". To put emphasis on this point, the opening was paired with talks with international speakers, asked to respond to the artistic, political and social implications of both the exhibition itself, as well as the painting's journey to Ramallah. Hourani notes that by overcoming the obstacles, the project brings attention to the current situation in Palestine, and "gives the art project the power of the impossible". The symbolic importance of the exchange did not escape the visitors; in a video report by the Al Arabiya News Channel, a woman interviewed stated that although it was not the first time she had seen a Picasso, but it is "of course" the first time in Palestine (Faraj 2011). It becomes evident that message of the project does not end with the exhibition itself. In its physical displacement the artwork acquired a new history, taking on extra meaning, "constructing new histories... as well as preserving old ones" (Van Abbemuseum).

The transfer in fact came at a time that, internationally, Palestine's position in the world was under scrutiny; the exchange took place just two months before the UN's general assembly in September 2011, where Palestine would request to be admitted as a member state, calling for international recognition of the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as a capital (BBC 2011).

Although several member states do recognize Palestine, the Dutch minister for foreign affairs stated that The Netherlands would *not* support a Palestinian statehood, instead calling for a return to negotiation. Despite this stance, Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, reacted by stating that the Netherlands' close links with Israel "doesn't disturb [Palestine] at all", citing the Palestinians' appreciation for their help (EUBusiness 2011). Therefore, it could be suggested that although the Netherlands may not officially recognize the state of Palestine, they are supportive of the people and the issues surrounding the bid, the support of the Picasso project being an example of this. It reminds us of Baroness Kennedy's notion of an 'act of faith' creating a favourable image of Dutch foreign policy; adding an element to the Netherlands' *soft power*, and in turn making Hourani's statement that the loan would "create a sense of normality" (Bouadi 2011), ever more admissible. It further recalls Christine Sylvester's statement that museums are 'internationally implicated' and 'socially situated social institutions' and thereby heavily political.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that the project also has potential to add to Palestine's *soft power*. In Hourani's wish for the painting to create a sense of 'normality', there is an implied wish to demonstrate to the world that Palestine has the potential to exist as a stable nation; the exchange representing, in Esche's words, a "testing ground for the future" (Esche). The exchange allows Palestine to present itself as a 'modern' nation where there is an appreciation for modern art; thereby promoting values that can be universalized. Through initiatives such as these, Palestine slowly elevates its image internationally, commanding respect through means other than economic and military elements.

The examples of cultural exchanges thus far discussed have largely concerned exhibitions where the audience was required to physically visit the location in order to view them. The increasing use and reach of the Internet however, provides new ways for nations to promote their cultures to those who are not able to travel and view exhibitions in person. An interesting initiative, which perhaps is also an indication of how museums will increasingly play a role in the future, is the 'Museum with No Frontiers' (MWNF), a 'trans-national

museum' on the Internet. It was formed in 1995 with the aim of creating a formal partnership between the European Union and its Mediterranean neighbours. According to the main page of the website, MWNF aims to "promote cultural integration as a means of facilitating political cooperation between different countries and cultures" (MWNF 2011) through raising awareness of artistic and cultural heritage. To achieve this, it brings together experts from a variety of fields, from academia to tourism, as well as a number of organizations, including museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, from 19 countries in Europe. MWNF takes advantage of modern technology to combine collections without physically having to move works of art, to create a virtual museum that allows visitors to view related artwork in other museums, in addition to a separate travel branch dedicated to organizing tours to monuments in their original environments. A particularly relevant project by this organization is entitled *Discover Islamic Art*, which aims to allow people to experience all aspects the overwhelming amount of art from the Arab world, an endeavour that would be near impossible in 'real life' because of how much the culture has spread. Through the Internet, different regions and time periods can easily be accessed and related to. The initiative could also provide to be a useful aid in Esche's vision for museums to take on the role presenting or challenging visitors with a particular view, and in the future take on the role of promoting cooperation. Nye contends that although face-to-face communications remain the most effective, they can be "supplemented and reinforced by the Internet" (Nye 2008, 104). The MWNF therefore provides an example of how individual nations can employ the Internet to enhance their position globally, and is thus interesting to the UK and Palestine alike.

*Soft power*, as we have seen, can have far reaching implications in global politics; from affecting negotiations surrounding Iran's nuclear program to enhancing Palestine's position in it's bid for statehood. Whether the loans on the part of either museum were influenced or encouraged by governments is not made explicit, although it is certain that favourable laws instituted by the individual governments were of great importance, and it is evident that all countries involved benefit from the work done by their institutions. It is

therefore understandable that Holden argues that “in an increasingly connected world, we should no longer think of culture as *subordinate* to politics” (Holden, et al., 20), and instead think of it as providing the context for politics. Because exchanges allow for the chance to better understand the thoughts of others and to see first hand what values separate nations share, “exchanges are often more effective than mere broadcasting” (Nye 2008, 103). Both the British Museum and the Van Abbemuseum played instrumental roles in communicating their governments’ attractive elements of native culture, demonstrated inherent political values, and displayed the favourable elements of their foreign policies; the three resources which Nye deems essential for *soft power*. It is important to also keep in mind however, examples of how museums and art institutions can foster negative images, such as when the Iranian government threatened to sever cultural ties after the loan of the Cyrus Cylinder became uncertain. We could thus question the emphasis that must be placed on soft power, whether or not it should play a major role in international relations and, in the grand scheme of things, how much effect it really has, leading Nye to propose “smart power” (Nye 2004, 147), a mix of hard and soft as a possible solution. Nevertheless, *soft power* must not be underestimated. Its value is perhaps best encapsulated by a quote from Nick Aikens in a blog entry for *frieze*. While on his way back to the UK he was stopped by security and questioned about his visit, and had trouble convincing the guards of his intentions. When he explained his story to a more senior security guard his answer was “Ah’, he said, ‘the famous Picasso that went to Ramallah. I saw it on TV” (Aikens 2011), and with that Aikens was free to continue his journey.

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