

The Museum as Translator: Cross-Contextual Display Strategies for Cultural Heritage and Appreciation Education

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Abstract

In an era of intensifying globalization and cultural diversity, the museum's role has shifted from traditional custodian of artefacts to active cultural translator. This paper examines translation strategies employed in the cross-contextual display of cultural heritage and their application in appreciation education. Drawing on Cultural Translation theory and New Museology, the museum is conceptualized as both a "contact zone" and a "third space." Through case studies of the China and South Asia Gallery at the British Museum and Dunhuang art exhibitions at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the paper reveals how museums transform heterogeneous cultural heritage into intelligible meaning networks through spatial narrative, multimodal display, and constructivist educational strategies. Effective cross-contextual display requires not only interlingual accuracy but also cultural context reconstruction and meaning negotiation — a translatory exhibitionary strategy offering a new educational paradigm for cross-cultural appreciation.

Keywords: museology, cultural translation, cultural heritage, display strategy, appreciation education, intercultural communication

1 Introduction

In the context of 21st-century globalization, the flow and display of cultural heritage now cross unprecedented geographical and cultural boundaries. As core institutions responsible for preserving and presenting the achievements of human civilization, museums are facing the challenge of effectively conveying the heterogeneous cultural meanings of artifacts to audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. Traditional museology has often treated exhibits as objective carriers of knowledge, reducing the display process to a unidirectional transmission of information[1]. However, with the rise of the "New Museology," scholars have gradually come to recognize that museum display is essentially a process of constructing power, discourse, and meaning[2,3].

In this paradigmatic shift, the concept of "translation" has been introduced into museum studies. It transcends mere interlingual conversion and expands into a broad mechanism of cultural interpretation. Neather (2024) systematically proposes that museums, galleries, and heritage sites are not only venues where translation occurs, but are themselves "translation zones," in which material culture is transformed into textual and visual narratives to accommodate the cognitive frameworks of different audiences[4].

This article aims to explore the specific operational mechanisms of the metaphor "museum as translator" in the cross-contextual display of cultural heritage. It addresses three core questions: (1) How do museums achieve cross-contextual translation of cultural heritage through display strategies? (2) How does this translation process influence audiences' construction of meaning? (3) How can display strategies grounded in the perspective of cultural translation reshape the educational function of museum appreciation?

2 Theoretical Framework: Cultural Translation and Museum Contact Zones

Before examining museums' cross-contextual display strategies, it is necessary to establish a solid theoretical foundation. This section integrates key concepts from postcolonial cultural studies and New Museology to construct a three-dimensional theoretical framework for understanding "the museum as cultural translator" (see Table 1).

Table 1. Three-dimensional theoretical framework of the museum as cultural translator

Post-Colonial Dimension	Museological Dimension	Pedagogical Dimension
Bhabha (1994) — Third Space / Hybridity; cultural translation as	Clifford (1997) — Contact Zone / Negotiation of Power; multi-	Hein (1998) — Constructivist Learning; active meaning-making

Post-Colonial Dimension	Museological Dimension	Pedagogical Dimension
non-equivalent transfer	directional cultural interaction	
Core Concepts: cultural mobility, hybrid identity, imperfect translation	Core Concepts: power asymmetry, collaborative curating, polyphonic narrative	Core Concepts: situated learning, interpretive community, audience agency
Three-Dimensional Intersection: museum exhibition as cultural translation and meaning negotiation within a “contact zone”		

Note: This theoretical framework synthesizes the core contributions of Bhabha (1994), Clifford (1997), and Hein (1998), and is further informed by Bennett’s (1995) theory of the exhibition complex and Neather’s (2024) concept of the “translation zone.”

2.1 Cultural Translation and the Third Space

The theory of cultural translation emerges at the intersection of post-colonial studies and cultural studies. Homi Bhabha (1994)[5], in *The Location of Culture*, introduced the concepts of “Third Space” and “hybridity.” According to Bhabha, cultural translation does not involve transferring one culture intact into another. Rather, new meanings emerge through the collision and negotiation of two cultures. This process inevitably entails the loss, distortion, and reconstruction of meaning, yet it is precisely this imperfection that creates space for cultural innovation. Within the “Third Space,” the boundaries between source and target cultures blur, and inherent cultural essentialism is disrupted, replaced by a fluid, hybrid cultural identity.

Applied to museology, this theory implies that the museum exhibition space itself functions as a “Third Space.” When an artifact from a specific cultural context is placed in a museum of another culture, it is removed from its original habitat and enters a new interpretive network. The museum acts as a translator: its task is not to restore the artifact’s original, pure meaning, but to establish a dialogue among the object, curatorial intentions, and the audience’s pre-understandings, thereby generating a hybrid and dynamic cultural cognition[6].

2.2 Museums as Contact Zones and the Exhibitionary Complex

James Clifford (1997)[7], drawing on Mary Louise Pratt, defines the museum as a “contact zone”—a space where different cultures meet, conflict, and interact under conditions of highly asymmetrical power relations. This perspective requires museums to exercise heightened self-reflection when presenting cross-cultural exhibitions, remaining alert to potential cultural domination and stereotyping.

Tony Bennett’s (1988) [8]“exhibitionary complex” theory reminds us that museum display strategies are deeply entwined with power relations: what is displayed, how it is displayed, and who interprets it all reflect specific cultural politics. Consequently, the cultural translation process in museums is never neutral and inevitably carries ideological traces. Macdonald (1998) further notes that the political nature of exhibitions manifests in how spatial layout, textual explanation, and visual design shape the audience’s perception of “other” cultures[9].

3 Strategies of Cross-Contextual Display

3.1 Strategy One: Contextual Reconstruction and Spatial Narrative

The primary challenge facing cross-cultural display is “contextual loss.” Taking the British Museum’s China and South Asia galleries (Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery, Room 33) as an example, after its reopening in 2017, the gallery adopted an entirely new spatial narrative strategy[10]. The curatorial team abandoned the traditional Western taxonomic approach of classifying objects solely by material. Instead, it combined a chronological axis with thematic structures. By placing artifacts within specific historical periods—such as “Ming Dynasty Court Life” or “Trade along the Silk Road”—the museum provided Western audiences with a historical framework for understanding Chinese material culture. This spatial narrative itself constitutes a form of macro-level cultural translation: it weaves scattered artifacts into a coherent cultural epic, effectively reducing the “cultural discount” and enabling audiences with limited prior knowledge of Chinese history to establish meaningful cognitive connections(see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative analysis of cross-contextual display translation strategies

Translation Strategy	Core Mechanism	Representative Case	Educational Function	Main Limitation
Contextual Reconstruction	Reconstruction of timeline and thematic	British Museum Room 33 (2017)	Reduces cultural discount; establishes historical contextual	Narrative still dominated by curatorial authority

Translation Strategy	Core Mechanism	Representative Case	Educational Function	Main Limitation
	narrative		understanding	
Multimodal Translation	Integration of visual, auditory, and tactile sensory channels	Hong Kong Heritage Museum Dunhuang Series Exhibition	Embodied cognition; bridges temporal gaps	Loss of authenticity; dependent on technology
Polyphonic Narrative	Juxtaposition of multiple voices; collaborative curation	Indigenous heritage exhibitions; re-contextualization of colonial collections	Fosters critical thinking; reconstructs cultural agency	Conflicting narratives may cause confusion

Note: The three translation strategies are not mutually exclusive; in practice, they are often employed in combination. For the sources of the cases, see Note 10 (British Museum), Note 12 (Hong Kong Heritage Museum), and the relevant main text.

3.2 Strategy Two: Multimodal Translation and Sensory Experience

The Dunhuang art series exhibitions organized by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum serve as a classic example of multimodal cultural translation. As immovable cultural heritage, the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang cannot have their authentic experience directly replicated [11]. The exhibition employed high-precision 3D cave replicas, digital projections, immersive soundscapes, and interactive multimedia installations to transform Dunhuang religious art into visual and auditory experiences accessible to modern urban audiences. This not only bridged geographical distance but also crossed the gulf between ancient religious contexts and contemporary secular ones. Neves (2018) notes that through multimodal and multilingual communication strategies, museums can provide seamless cultural experiences for audiences of varying abilities [12].

Furthermore, multimodal translation is also evident in the presentation of intangible cultural heritage. By playing reconstructed Tang-dynasty music and displaying motion-capture videos of dance movements depicted in Dunhuang murals, the exhibition converts static wall paintings into dynamic performing arts. This cross-media translation strategy offers an embodied pathway to cognition: audiences are no longer mere visual spectators but actively participate in the generation of cultural meaning through auditory, tactile, and even kinesthetic engagement.

3.3 Strategy Three: Polyphony of Interpretation

Traditional museum displays often adopt a single, authoritative curatorial voice. From the perspective of cultural translation, however, effective cross-contextual display requires the introduction of “polyphony,” allowing multiple voices and perspectives to coexist. By incorporating voices from the source cultural communities, museums break the monolithic narrative of Western-centrism—for instance, by presenting both academic archaeological interpretations and indigenous oral histories on the same label panels, or by displaying contemporary artists’ reinterpretations of traditional heritage.

In practice, polyphonic narrative is frequently realized through “co-curation.” This approach is not only a symbolic redress for historical injustices but also a redistribution of power in cultural translation. By juxtaposing different—even conflicting—narratives, museums acknowledge the fluidity and inherent uncertainty of cultural meaning, encouraging audiences to engage in critical thinking within complex historical contexts.

4 Constructivist Turn in Appreciation Education

Museum display strategies directly shape their educational function. Display practices grounded in a cultural translation perspective promote a shift in museum appreciation education toward Constructivism (see Table 3).

Table 3. Constructivist cross-cultural appreciation education model (adapted from Falk & Dierking, 2000)

Personal Context	Social Context	Physical Context
Cultural Background; Personal Experience; Pre-understanding; Identity Recognition; Learning Motivation and Expectations	Peer Interaction; Family Influence; Docent Guidance; Community Dialogue; Construction of Interpretive Community	Exhibition Space Design; Exhibit Layout; Multimodal Display Media; Museum Atmosphere and Discipline

Personal Context	Social Context	Physical Context
Intersection of the three contexts → cross-cultural meaning negotiation → formation of interpretive community → enhancement of cross-cultural appreciation skills		

Note: The model is adapted from Falk & Dierking's (2000) Contextual Model of Learning, integrating Hein's (1998) constructivist museum education theory and Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) concept of interpretive communities.

4.1 Meaning Negotiation and Construction

In his book "Learning in the Museum", George E. Hein (1998) systematically expounds the theory of constructivist museum education: knowledge is not externally objective but actively constructed by learners through interaction with their environment. Falk and Dierking's (2000) Contextual Model of Learning further argues that the museum experience is an interplay of personal, social, and physical contexts[13]. When audiences encounter foreign cultural heritage, the process of appreciation is essentially a negotiation between their own cultural frameworks and the alien cultural frameworks represented by the exhibits[14]. The success of the museum as translator lies not in whether audiences accurately remember specific historical dates, but in whether it provokes cognitive conflict and meaning reconstruction.

4.2 Cultivation of Interpretive Communities

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000) proposed the concept of "interpretive communities," emphasizing that meaning construction is inherently social and cultural. Freeman Tilden's (1957) primary principle of interpretation states: "Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile[15]. Therefore, effective cultural translation strategies must identify points of connection (hooks) between foreign cultural heritage and the lived experiences of local audiences[16]. Through interactive guided tours, workshops, and educational programs, museums guide visitors to reflect on their own cultural biases and to appreciate and respect cultural differences within a "third space."

Inquiry-based learning and Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) are widely applied in cross-cultural appreciation practices, encouraging audiences to explore the meaning of exhibits through careful observation, questioning, and group discussion. In this process, museum educators act as "cultural mediators," guiding audiences to establish dialogue between their own cultural experiences and the foreign cultural attributes of the exhibits, thereby cultivating the open-mindedness and critical reflective capacity required for intercultural communication.

5 Conclusion

In the era of globalization, the museum's role as a cultural translator is more important than ever. This study demonstrates that the cross-contextual display of cultural heritage is not merely physical relocation or linguistic conversion, but a complex process of cultural translation and meaning reconstruction. Through strategies such as contextual reconstruction, multimodal display, and polyphonic narrative, museums create a dynamic "third space" and "contact zone" between source cultures and target audiences.

Display strategies grounded in a cultural translation perspective profoundly reshape the educational function of museum appreciation. They shift museum education from traditional knowledge transmission to constructivist meaning negotiation, aiming to cultivate interpretive communities with cross-cultural understanding. In this process, audiences are no longer passive recipients of knowledge but active constructors of meaning, continuously enriching and expanding their cultural horizons through interaction with exhibits, spaces, and other visitors.

Future museum practice should further deepen the understanding of cultural translation mechanisms. First, museums need to strengthen cooperation with source cultural communities to ensure full respect for their cultural agency in cross-cultural displays. Second, with the development of digital technologies, museums should actively explore the potential of emerging media such as VR and AR in cultural translation. Finally, museum appreciation education should place greater emphasis on cultivating visitors' critical thinking and intercultural empathy, enabling them not only to appreciate the beauty of other cultures but also to understand and respect the historical and social roots behind cultural differences. Only in this way can museums truly fulfill their noble mission as cultural translators and bridges for civilizational dialogue in an increasingly complex and volatile global context.

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