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**Soft Power in Museums: Nation Branding and
the Redefinition of Colonial Legacies**

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how the British Museum, through its exhibitions and collections, contribute to the international perception of the United Kingdom, considering the history of artifact acquisition during colonial times. The research employs a case study approach, centred on the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition, which showcases female spiritual authority through artifacts from various cultures, many acquired from former British colonies. The study uses a combination of document analysis of the exhibition catalogue and semi-structured interviews with exhibition visitors to explore public perceptions. Findings reveal that while the British Museum is appreciated for its educational and cultural contributions, its colonial legacy continues to cast a shadow over its efforts in cultural diplomacy. Participants expressed a desire for greater transparency and ethical responsibility in how the museum handles and presents its collections. The thesis concludes that for museums like the British Museum to enhance their role in nation branding and cultural diplomacy, they must address historical injustices and engage in more inclusive and honest storytelling.

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1. Introduction

In 2023 the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, an annual study that aims to assess countries' images overseas, ranked the United Kingdom fourth for its rich tapestry of historic buildings and vibrant cultural heritage (VisitBritain 2023). However, as a former colonial power, Great Britain is also unavoidably associated with centuries of imperialism and its legacies. In particular, colonialism's lingering influence in the United Kingdom, as in much of Europe, is evident through cultural establishments like museums, which, holding numerous objects acquired from former colonies through illicit ways, are facing mounting calls for the repatriation of these artifacts (Knott 2018; Sommerlad 2023). In particular, debates around artifact acquisition were reignited in 2021 when the British government declined UNESCO's appeal for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece (Scott 2023).

Museums wield considerable influence over a nation's portrayal, prestige, and positioning in the international arena. This influence has the potential for impacting diplomatic relations and the soft power projection of nations (Fan 2010), which is the ability to influence others by attraction and persuasion (Nye 1990). Serving as custodians of history, they serve an indispensable function in reflecting and articulating the narratives of the nations they represent (Nanda 2004).

In addition to hosting cultural events in London, the British Museum also loans and arranges exhibitions, both domestically and overseas. According to the Museum's Annual Report and Accounts 2022/2023 a total of 1,929 objects has been loaned to 122 venues around the UK, reaching over 4 million visitors outside London. For international exhibitions, the report mentions contributions to events in Paris, Naples, New Zealand, Australia, and Spain (British Museum 2023). One such exhibition is "Venerades i Temudes," currently being held in Barcelona in collaboration with Caixa Forum since February 21st and

running until June 16th. Through the artworks, the traveling exhibition seeks to illustrate the role of feminine spiritual entities in shaping our perception of the world, and to explore diverse representations of female spiritual authority. Featuring 154 pieces from the British Museum alongside works by contemporary artists, the exhibition aims to prompt visitors to contemplate female empowerment and femininity by highlighting women's influence in various cultures, challenging traditional narratives and encouraging a deeper understanding of female empowerment throughout history (“Veneradas y temidas | Exposición | CaixaForum Barcelona,” n.d.). However, it raises questions about whether this use of soft power also serves as a form of whitewashing, presenting a progressive discourse about women while potentially obscuring the colonial histories of the artifacts.

This partnership between the British Museum and Caixa Forum contributes to projecting British cultural influence and values on the global stage, which can be seen as a prime example of the broader notion of soft power. Coincidentally, the exhibition also showcases numerous objects acquired from former British colonies. Therefore, this exhibition can serve as a platform to examine how a major national institution, such as the British Museum, navigates the challenge of promoting cultural values while addressing contentious historical legacies. It demonstrates how the British Museum leverages international partnerships and its extensive collection to project British cultural influence globally, all while facing mounting demands for repatriation and ethical exhibition practices. Thus, the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition becomes a microcosm for understanding the relationship between cultural diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding in post-colonial contexts.

In the context of my research, the puzzle revolves around the British Museum's function in the global narrative: it stands as a prestigious custodian of global heritage, yet simultaneously as a repository of objects acquired under the shadow of British colonialism. These two roles stand in apparent contradiction. While museums like the British Museum are

traditionally seen to enhance a nation's soft power by showcasing cultural wealth and contributing to international dialogue, this is contrasted by the hard power dynamics of imperialism, which complicate the museum's legacy and role in cultural diplomacy and revive the ongoing debates over the repatriation of cultural artifacts and the ethical implications of their acquisition.

Given that cultural capital represents a substantial tangible asset capable of shaping global public perceptions and impacting individuals on emotional and psychological levels (Grincheva 2020b), the British Museum faces a critical challenge in a post-colonial nation like Great Britain: “How do British Museum cultural initiatives shape visitor’s perceptions of the UK’s nation branding through its representation of heritage?”. This question will be the starting point of this thesis, which seeks to explore the role of the British Museum and its cultural diplomacy in shaping the UK's international reputation, particularly in light of its colonial history.

This investigation holds great significance, as understanding the role of cultural institutions in shaping national reputation and perception has become increasingly crucial. First of all, in today's increasingly interconnected world, where time is limited and attention span is short, individuals and organizations often rely on simplistic clichés to navigate the complexities of global affairs. These clichés, whether positive or negative, accurate or not, significantly influence our perceptions and behaviours toward other nations and their products. Consequently, governments and institutions must carefully assess and manage their nation's global reputation to remain relevant and respected. To earn admiration and prestige, a country must actively engage in meaningful conversations on topics of global importance (Anholt 2011).

Secondly, museum collections and ancient artifacts act as powerful attractions, drawing visitors from around the globe to view these pieces and stimulating activity in local

economies. An investigation on the economic impact of the Louvre on tourism in Paris, found that up to 52% of foreign tourists consider the Louvre their primary reason for visiting the city, contributing 535 million euros annually to Paris's economy. Similarly, London enjoys high tourism rates due to its world-class museums, which serve as primary repositories of global cultural heritage (Grincheva 2020b).

Finally, while the concept of nation branding has been explored and studied, it is less clear how the practices of cultural diplomacy employed by museums contribute to the overall nation branding efforts of countries, especially in presence of a colonial history. In light of this, understanding the intersection of cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power through museum engagement becomes imperative for policymakers, cultural institutions, and scholars alike, offering insights essential for fostering positive international relations and economic growth.

The research design involves fieldwork at the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition using qualitative methods. Through semi-structured interviews with visitors, I will gather insights into their perceptions of the exhibition and its impact on the UK's reputation. The diverse sample will include visitors from different demographics, nationalities, and cultural backgrounds to capture a range of perspectives. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts will uncover recurring themes and patterns. Additionally, document analysis of the exhibition catalogue will reveal the British Museum's intended messaging and key narratives, illustrating how the exhibition represents British culture, history, and values on a global stage. This will also highlight any discrepancies between the curated narrative and visitor experiences. Examining the catalogue will further illuminate the British Museum's cultural diplomacy strategies, offering comprehensive insights into how this exhibition exemplifies the interplay between cultural diplomacy and nation branding in shaping the UK's international reputation.

The overall structure of the thesis takes the form of seven sections. The following section comprises the theoretical framework, in which the concepts of cultural diplomacy, nation branding and soft power are defined, and the literature review, where existing scholarship on cultural diplomacy, nation branding, soft power, and the role of museums is discussed. The third section describes the case study in greater detail. The fourth section delineates the research design, where the methodology employed is outlined. The fifth and sixth section are the findings sections, which present the results of the document analysis performed on the exhibition catalogue and the interviews. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key findings, discuss their implications, and offer recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

In today's interconnected world, the concepts of cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power play integral roles in shaping how nations communicate and present themselves to the rest of the world. Cultural institutions, in particular museums, have emerged as significant actors within these frameworks, strategically leveraging their collections and exhibitions to project a curated national identity and influence international perceptions. This literature review, which examines historical contexts, theoretical frameworks, and empirical studies, aims to explore the current state of knowledge on the concepts of cultural diplomacy, nation branding, soft power, museums and their intersections, shedding light on the contribution museums make in shaping national reputation, fostering global dialogue, and navigating the complexities of cultural diplomacy and soft power in the modern age.

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Diplomacy, Nation Branding and Soft Power

First, it is necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by cultural diplomacy, nation branding and soft power by providing definitions of these concepts. Cultural diplomacy is a nebulous concept. The most widely used definition is provided by Milton Cummings, who defines cultural diplomacy as “exchanges of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding. But cultural diplomacy can also be more of a one-way street than a two-way exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or telling its story to the rest of the world.” (Cummings 2003, p.1). This specific definition implies that, while cultural diplomacy can be used as a tool for facilitating and promoting intercultural dialogue, it can also be used as a way to advance specific national interests. The latter use of cultural diplomacy explains some of the negative connotations that are often associated with the term. Cultural diplomacy is, in fact, frequently associated to colonialism, imperialism, and propaganda. With the rise of globalization, these concerns have become even more pronounced and timely (Nisbett 2013). Conversely, other scholars argue that cultural diplomacy falls on a spectrum stretching from cultural propaganda to cultural relations, and that diplomacy is distinct from the coercive tactics employed by authoritarian regimes and aggressive states (Mitchell 1986, cited in Nisbett 2013, p.558). The question of agency is also contested. Historically, cultural diplomacy has predominantly been utilized by states to advance their foreign policy goals (Grincheva 2020a). However, today, the notion of cultural diplomacy has transformed to encompass endeavours that surpass governmental oversight or involvement (Jarry 2021).

The concept of nation branding has captured the attention of scholars across various disciplines, spanning from management and political science to communication and cultural

studies (Dinnie 2022). As a consequence, there exists a multitude of definitions for the term, varying according to individual perspectives and academic specializations (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2023). The term was coined in 1996 by Simon Anholt, who found that the reputation of a nation behaves similarly to the brands associated with companies and products (Anholt 2011). Nation branding consists of the management of a country's image, reputation, and global positioning, through marketing and branding techniques, which rely on the dissemination and promotion of cultural ideals, values, and identities in order to construct a favourable perception of a country. It can therefore serve as a tool in developing and maintaining soft power (Fan 2006; 2010; Grincheva 2020b). Due to its complexity, nation branding necessitates collaboration among diverse stakeholders, who may not always align on a singular, unified national brand. Many nations have engaged in nation branding, employing it as a communication tool between the country and the international community, using diverse channels such as tourism campaigns, incentives for foreign direct investment, and cultural institutions like museums (Rodner, Preece, and Chang 2020).

Finally, soft power, according to Joseph Nye, is the ability of a country to influence others through attraction, persuasion and cultural ideas rather than coercion, by shaping preferences and creating positive images about the foreign policy objectives of the country (Grincheva 2020b). This power is based on three main resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies, which, when appealing and legitimate, can enhance a nation's ability to build favourable relationships, foster a positive image of a country and facilitate desired outcomes in external relations (Hoogwaerts 2017). Museums, emblematic of a nation's credibility, can function as proponents of soft power (Rodner, Preece, and Chang 2020). Through cultural diplomacy, countries can utilize soft power to enhance their appeal and influence on other nations (Cai 2013). Nation branding further amplifies this effect when strategically used to promote a positive national image (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2023).

Cultural diplomacy, nation branding, soft power and museums are interconnected in various ways. Cultural diplomacy promotes a nation's image on the global stage, while the arts and culture sector contributes significantly to a country's brand value. Additionally, government engagement in the arts and cultural sector has been found to enhance national brand value further (Ahn and Wu 2013). Museums, as key cultural institutions, play a significant role in this process (Nisbett 2013). The relationship between these elements is further explored by Hurn (2016) and Yalkin (2017), who argue that cultural diplomacy, characterized as a tool of "soft power," has an influential role in nation branding and has demonstrated considerable success in elevating a nation's reputation internationally.

The subsequent historical examination of museums within this theoretical framework will shed light on the role of these concepts in shaping national identities and projecting global images.

2.2. Historical Evolution of Museums

To appreciate the role of museums in nation branding and cultural diplomacy, it is essential to contextualize their historical evolution and societal function.

According to the definition provided by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is a “not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (ICOM 2022). While museums can be traced back to the sixteenth century, the contemporary museum originated later in the nineteenth century, when it evolved into a predominantly educational establishment (Simmons 2010).

The societal function of the contemporary public museum has been extensively explored by Tony Bennett, who draws from Michel Foucault's analysis of the modern State. Bennett observes that the 19th century witnessed the emergence of various new spaces, including museums, which were utilized by the State to reinforce power dynamics between the government and the populace through cultural and recreational activities (Bennett 1995).

From the mid-19th century onwards, cultural institutions were conceptualized and structured to civilize the entire population according to bourgeois values. This process of "civilizing" the masses within the national context was also intertwined with the colonial discourse propagated by European colonial powers, which justified colonial expansion by framing it as evidence of human progress (Sauvage 2010). Through processes such as trade and colonialism the concept of the modern public museum spread successfully to regions under European colonization, effectively becoming extensions of colonial rule (Simmons 2010; Grincheva 2020b). However, following World War II, critiques of colonial ideology started to emerge, pushing museum curators to reconsider the narratives presented in their exhibitions and gradually transition towards more contemporary, pluralist and international perspectives, challenging the racial and evolutionary hierarchies that governed previous museum practices (Sauvage 2010).

The initial challenges to the prevailing narratives in museums arose from former colonies, where Indigenous peoples demanded inclusion in the national narrative and contested the accuracy of the stories depicted within museum walls. This post-colonial reinterpretation of imperial history, known as "new museology," emphasizes individual and community cultural development over national greatness, and questions the imperialist and racist aspects of traditional museum collection (Sauvage 2010). Moreover, since the late 20th century, shifting ideological paradigms, social transformations, the advancement of new media technologies, and global awareness have led to a decline in confidence in the

traditional perception and role of museums as exclusive preservers of tradition and high culture (Earle 2013; Trotter 1998).

Museums, their collections and international exhibitions have all played a significant role in the development and perpetuation of colonialism (Barringer and Flynn 1998; cited in Wintle 2013). They have been used to display the spoils of imperialism and promote the cultural superiority of Europe and they have perpetuated, romanticized and stereotyped narratives that serve to justify the dominance of colonial powers over marginalized groups. The items present in museums were often acquired through theft, looting, or unfair trade practices of material objects, including plants, animals, human remains, and knowledge, from colonies, without consent, and were subsequently used for research and exhibition (Vawda 2019). Even during the process of decolonization, the methods of exhibition and acquisition could still allow individuals within declining empires to maintain a degree of influence over the decolonization process (Wintle 2013). Nevertheless, museums have occasionally been sites of resistance and decolonization too.

Many of the museums established during the age of imperialism in the colonized territories underwent significant transformations, and became pivotal national institutions. As countries first gained independence from their colonial rulers, museums played crucial roles in fostering national identity by interpreting their collections in ways that emphasized a sense of national ownership and distinct cultural identities. Furthermore, some of these museums played key roles in the resistance against colonialism (Simmons 2010). They facilitated various stakeholders, both in the colonial powers and former colonies, to experiment with and implement different forms of decolonization, neo-colonialism, independence, and anti-colonial resistance, acting as microcosms of larger political dynamics. Importantly, museums also provided a platform for emerging powers from former colonies to assert their own agendas, compelling museum staff to acknowledge and address their influence (Wintle 2013).

The processes of empire-building and museum establishment were closely intertwined, with naturalists accompanying exploration missions bringing back exotic artifacts that populated Enlightenment-era cabinets of curiosities. Consequently, the transformation of museums into postcolonial institutions reflects a rediscovery of the legacy of the empire and the challenge of assessing this legacy in connection with contemporary postcolonial communities (Aldrich 2009).

In postcolonial nations, museums continue to play a role in constructing colonial memory, with the potential to challenge and deconstruct colonial narratives. During the 1970s, numerous Caribbean museums transitioned from predominantly highlighting their society's colonial history to showcasing more comprehensive cultural and natural histories (Simmons 2010).

Finally, the inclusion of critical discussions of colonial history in museums holds significant benefits. By incorporating colonialism and its consequences into museum exhibitions, these institutions contribute to the public's understanding of different historical claims and experiences, thus fostering a more inclusive public memory (Richard 2014).

At the same time, the decolonization of museums proved to be a complex and multifaceted process, fraught with controversies and dilemmas. The Western origins of museums present a fundamental challenge to decolonization efforts, complicating the transformation into spaces that genuinely honour and represent the cultures they showcase (Maranda 2021). Moreover, the struggle between accurately portraying cultures and retaining curatorial authority underscores the tension in decolonization initiatives, necessitating a shift towards community representation and participation (Tlostanova 2017). The colonial origins of museum collections pose another obstacle, with the need to reinterpret and potentially repatriate items raising complex legal, logistical, and ethical considerations (Wintle 2013). Furthermore, institutional resistance to change, stemming from entrenched practices and

values, further complicates the decolonization process, highlighting the challenge of fundamentally altering museum practices to foster inclusivity and authenticity (Whittington 2022).

The historical trajectory of museums reveals a complex interplay of power dynamics and societal paradigms. This understanding lays the groundwork for the examination of how museums navigate these legacies and contribute to contemporary discourses of nation branding and cultural diplomacy. Exhibitions like "Venerades i Temudes" demonstrate these complexities, as their travels have largely been limited to Western countries, such as Great Britain, Spain, and Australia, rather than the countries of origin of the objects.

2.3. Museums as Agents of Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding

Historically, museums and art institutions have been pioneers in exhibiting cultural values and principles, functioning as educational centres. In contemporary times, these establishments have extended their impact globally, and governments are increasingly leveraging them in cultural diplomacy endeavours (Hoogwaerts 2017).

Analysing instances of exchanges and loans, Leanne Hoogwaert (2017) argues that museums and art institutions have the capacity to participate in cultural diplomacy, leading to positive impacts on international relations by encouraging mutual respect and understanding in ways that other forms of dialogue may not accomplish. The impact of international exchanges can be heightened when the objects involved hold strong ties to issues of national identity and heritage, showcasing how culture can act as a bridge during times of political turmoil until relations improve. An example of such an exchange occurred between the UK and Iran during the 2005 British Museum exhibition "Forgotten Empire: the World of Ancient Persia." This exhibition featured art loaned by various foreign museums, including Iran's National Museum in Tehran and the Persepolis Museum, amidst heightened international tension surrounding Iran's nuclear program. The collaboration between the

British Museum and the Iranian government to facilitate the exhibition marked a significant milestone, as it was the first time many artifacts had travelled outside Iran. This collaboration was underpinned by the British Museum's promise to loan the Cyrus Cylinder to Iran in return. While this exchange showcased the potential positive influence of cultural diplomacy, it also revealed the fragility of such relations. The British Museum's perceived hesitation to fulfil its promise triggered threats from the Iranian government to sever cultural relations. Despite the challenges, the loan of the Cyrus Cylinder served as a catalyst for resuming discussions between the two countries, underscoring the influential role that institutions like the British Museum can play in diplomatic relations (Nisbett 2013). Furthermore, Nisbett (2013) suggests that these institutions can forge partnerships, generate income, expand collections, and borrow artifacts as part of cultural diplomacy efforts. Research indicates that cultural institutions hold importance for governments, often aligning with governmental policies and even influencing the development of new policies.

However, a study examining a cultural cooperation agreement between Singapore and France presents contrasting findings. While exchanges of cultural artifacts can enhance mutual understanding and serve as symbolic gestures of goodwill between governments and populations, the study suggests limited evidence of their ability to exert soft power globally. Additionally, it notes that such exchanges often lack initial political motivations, and museums rarely align their partnerships with their nation's political objectives (Cai 2013).

In the case of the United Kingdom, research highlights the close connection between cultural diplomacy in museums and national prestige. The British government acknowledges the significant role played by national museums in cultural diplomacy, recognizing them as world-leading cultural and scientific institutions with substantial soft power value (Walden 2019). For instance, the British Museum is recognized as a prominent national repository of cultural heritage and history, and as such it has been conceptualized as a significant agent of

cultural diplomacy, aimed at addressing contemporary political and international relations issues by showcasing national cultures and artistic achievements on the global stage. Acting as identity machines and vital centres for shaping citizenry, museums have expanded their roles in recent decades from being symbols of a developed country's status to becoming pivotal actors in soft power strategies (Grincheva 2020b).

The examination of the impact of museums on cultural diplomacy reveals their potential to transcend political boundaries and foster global dialogue. This recognition sets the stage for exploring museums' roles in shaping national reputation and projecting global images.

In the realm of nation branding, museums emerge as pivotal players, strategically utilizing their collections and exhibitions to convey images to the global audience. Several factors could influence the formation of a nation's perception. Impressions of culture richness can serve as a reliable gauge or forecaster of a country's overall reputation (Nobre and Sousa 2022). Licona and Winston (2013) assert that museums and institutions dedicated to the study of cultural heritage wield significant influence. These establishments, reflecting the priorities and strengths of nations, play a vital role in cultural administration by strategically utilizing their collections. They find that, overall, culture, and particularly museums, are indispensable assets in shaping a country's brand. Similarly, Rodner et al. (2020) claim that museums can influence the formation of national identities in our collective consciousness by determining what is included or excluded within their walls, thus becoming increasingly pivotal players in nation-branding endeavours. As highly visible public spaces, museums can be regarded as tools for branding. The establishment of museums can serve as a means for governments to project specific images of their cities or nations to the global community, as they are integrated closely into broader social policies, especially when these museums have strong brands of their own. Moreover, cultural institutions can serve as instruments for politicians

seeking to reshape a nation's image, making them essential strategies for positioning a country on the global stage. Finally, allocating resources to arts and culture can contribute to positively shaping a nation's reputation. Despite their potential to influence a country's international reputation, the amount of research on the role of museums in nation branding is still quite limited, highlighting the need for further investigation in this area.

2.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, museums play a crucial role in shaping a nation's international reputation and identity, serving as strategic platforms for conveying cultural narratives to a global audience. Despite their potential influence, research on the role of museums in nation branding remains limited, highlighting a significant area for further exploration in understanding the dynamics of cultural diplomacy and soft power. By addressing this gap in the literature, this research aims not only to shed light on the museums' roles in cultural diplomacy and nation branding but also contribute to the development of more effective strategies and policies in leveraging museums as agents of soft power on the global stage. Building upon the insights garnered from this literature review, the subsequent section of the thesis will delve into the research design employed to investigate the roles of the British Museum in branding the United Kingdom.

3. The Case Study: The British Museum and the Venerades i Temudes Exhibition

The history of the British Museum dates back to its founding in 1753, which means that its history is inevitably tied to that of the British Empire. When it opened its doors to the public in 1759, it became the world's first free, national, public museum, embodying Enlightenment ideals such as critical scrutiny, scientific research and progress. Sir Hans Sloane, a physician and President of the Royal Society, played a significant role in its

establishment by bequeathing his vast collection of over 80,000 objects to King George II. This collection, which included natural specimens, books, manuscripts, coins, and medals, formed the basis of the British Museum. Sloane's collection was acquired through his extensive travels and networks, including connections established through European imperial expansion. His financial means for collecting were partly derived from income generated by enslaved labour on Jamaican sugar plantations, reflecting the colonial context of the time ("History | British Museum," n.d.; Nisbett 2013).

Over the centuries, the museum's collections expanded through acquisitions, donations, bequests, and excavations, covering two million years of human history and comprising about eight million objects. Oftentimes, the acquisition of these objects was either directly or indirectly influenced by colonialism (Nisbett 2013).

Despite its enriched collections from various cultures and regions, making it one of the world's most visited museums, the British Museum's colonial history and associations with the British Empire have sparked debates and criticisms, particularly regarding the acquisition of objects through colonial means. For many in the public, the Museum's history is closely linked with the British Empire. While the Museum continues to acquire objects through various means, there's a prevalent association between the British Museum and 'colonial looting'. This perception has long persisted, but there is now a growing number of individuals and communities voicing concerns about colonial injustices. The connection to the Empire poses a significant challenge for some, yet it also underscores the Museum's potential to engage in contemporary discussions about colonial history by adopting innovative methods for researching, exhibiting, and interpreting its collections. Director Hartwig Fischer has acknowledged the need for the museum to address its colonial past and to be more open in discussing its history (Frost 2019).

Indeed, Hans Sloane's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade is a part of the British Museum's history that is often overlooked. However, confronting this uncomfortable truth is crucial in understanding the full context of the British Museum's origins and its entanglement with darker chapters of history (Boissoneault 2017).

As the British Museum continues to address its colonial history, it also actively participates in cultural diplomacy through exhibitions abroad and loans. These initiatives can serve as a form of cultural diplomacy, promoting international understanding and collaboration. This is particularly evident in the case of the British Museum, whose exhibitions and loans are not merely acts of cultural presentation but are imbued with diplomatic intent. These activities serve as a platform for promoting international understanding and collaboration, showcasing the museum's commitment to fostering global connections through cultural exchange (Walden 2019). Touring exhibitions are designed to transcend national boundaries, facilitating a dialogue that is both multicultural and inclusive. The emphasis on cosmopolitanism and intercultural exchange underscores the potential of museums to act as cosmopolitan ambassadors (Lee Davidson and Leticia Pérez-Castellanos 2018). Additionally, museums, in their role as cultural diplomats, can also wield power and influence over cultural policy. This dual role of museums as both promoters of cultural exchange and wielders of cultural power highlights the complex dynamics at play in the field of cultural diplomacy. Museums must carefully navigate these dynamics to ensure that their international engagements contribute positively to global cultural understanding while being mindful of the power imbalances that may exist (Nisbett 2013).

Therefore, the British Museum's international exhibitions and loans exemplify the significant role that museums can play in cultural diplomacy. By fostering international understanding and collaboration, museums like the British Museum contribute to a global dialogue that is increasingly necessary in today's interconnected world.

The exhibition "Venerades i temudes," presented by the British Museum in partnership with Fundació Bancaria La Caixa, is a touring version of the "Feminine Power: From the Divine to the Demonic" exhibition that took place in London from May 19, 2022, to September 25, 2022. Following its showcase in London, the exhibition was displayed at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra from December 8, 2022, to August 27, 2023, and in Madrid from September 28, 2023, to January 14, 2024. Currently, it is available for viewing in Barcelona, starting from February 21 until June 16. Curated by Belinda Crerar and Rosa Martínez, the exhibition is composed of 154 objects that span 6 continents and 5000 years, and it is organized around 5 themes: creation and nature; passion and desire; magic and malice; justice and defence; and compassion, wisdom and salvation, to show the significance of female representation across global religions, spirituality, and folklore, and to explore the various ways feminine influence has been perceived in a broad range of human experiences (Crerar 2022).

The exhibition's objective is primarily to illustrate the intrinsic connection between sex, gender, and desire with concepts of divine authority throughout history. Additionally, it seeks to underscore the ongoing significance and pertinence of inquiries surrounding female divine authority, which remain perplexing and pertinent. Being a touring exhibition, "Venerades i Temudes" can exemplify the museum's engagement in cultural diplomacy, by aiding in the dissemination of British cultural influence and values globally.

4. Research Methodology and Design

The aim of this study is to explore how cultural initiatives by the British Museum, in this case exemplified by the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition, influence visitors' perceptions of the UK's nation branding through its representation of heritage. The focus is on the

museum's role in cultural diplomacy and soft power projection, with particular attention to how its colonial legacy impacts its current image and operations.

The present study employs a qualitative research approach to address the complexities of cultural perceptions and their implications on national reputation. Qualitative methods offer an effective method of uncovering the depth of personal experiences and subjective insights, which are crucial for understanding the nuanced relationship between cultural diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding in a post-colonial context. Additionally, due to the research question's focus on perceptions and experiences, a qualitative approach is particularly suitable. Overall, this approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the nuances and diverse perspectives that shape foreign public perceptions of the British Museum's role in cultural diplomacy, its handling of colonial legacies, and its impact on the UK's international image.

4.1. Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this research combines document analysis with semi-structured interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of both the curatorial intent of the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition and the public's reception. Document analysis centred on the exhibition catalogue for "Feminine Power: The Divine to the Demonic," the precursor to "Venerades i Temudes" hosted at the British Museum in London. Authored by curator Belinda Crerar and prefaced by Mary Beard, the exhibition catalogue analysis offered insights into the official narrative presented by the British Museum, it expanded on the origin and significance of the artifacts displayed, and it assessed how the exhibition addresses or omits the colonial histories of the artifacts. The catalogue features essays by the curator which aim to support, expand, or complement the exhibition, therefore it is an invaluable source for understanding the curatorial process and how the exhibit is presented, and, in essence, for offering greater context to the exhibition itself. It also provides visitors with the means to compare the

intentions behind the curation with its actual realization in the museum space (Robinson 2016). Following the catalogue analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with visitors at the Caixa Forum Barcelona, where the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition was held. This interview format was chosen for its flexibility, which allows to delve deeper into the topic based on the participants' responses and explore areas that may not be initially anticipated. Additionally, the decision to use semi-structured interviews is supported by previous research practices within the field. For example, the British Museum employed semi-structured interviews in a 2017 study to investigate visitors' perceptions regarding the museum's main focus and objectives (Frost 2019).

Participants were purposefully selected to represent a diverse demographic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 visitors from various European countries, between the ages of 21 and 65 years old. The participant backgrounds varied, encompassing students, professionals, and individuals currently unemployed, all of whom were casual museum visitors. Additionally, none of them were professionals in museology, thus providing a broad public perspective on the museum's impact and practices. Each interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes, and they were conducted face-to-face at the venue after reviewing the exhibition to capture immediate reactions and perceptions. The interviews were guided by a core set of questions, but these were adapted based on participant responses to capture emerging insights. The questions focused on eliciting responses on general perceptions of the British Museum, views on the exhibition, and awareness and opinions on the museum's colonial legacy and artifact acquisition practices.

4.2. *Data Analysis*

The data from both the document analysis and the interviews was analysed employing a thematic analysis. This approach facilitated the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within the qualitative data, and effectively captured the complexity of participants'

perceptions and experiences. For the catalogue data, the process consisted of a meticulous reading of the volume to locate mentions of the methods and circumstances under which the artifacts were acquired by the museum. The findings from this analysis provided a critical foundation for discussing the museum's transparency and ethical practices in artifact procurement as presented to the public. Whereas, for the interview data, the process included transcribing interviews verbatim and identifying key themes and patterns. These themes were then interpreted to understand the exhibition's influence on perceptions of the British Museum and the UK's national image, focusing on how these perceptions are shaped by the museum's handling of colonial legacies. Digital recorders for capturing interviews and the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to convert audio recordings to text were utilized for the research.

The process of establishing themes for thematic analysis involved interpretive and iterative steps. The initial step involved thoroughly reading the exhibition catalogue and interview transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the content. During the initial readings, key concepts, recurring ideas, and patterns were identified and noted down as potential themes or sub-themes. Similar concepts and patterns were then grouped together to form broader themes. The initial set of themes was reviewed and refined by cross-referencing the themes with the data to verify their accuracy and making adjustments as necessary to better capture the nuances of the data. Each theme was then defined and named to encapsulate its essence and to ensure they were easily understandable and reflective of the underlying data.

The final themes identified were: Colonial Legacy and Repatriation, Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power, Transparency and Ethical Practices, Female Empowerment and Representation, Visitor Perception and Public Engagement, and Challenges and Criticisms. These themes formed the basis of the analysis and were used to interpret the findings from the document analysis and interviews, providing a detailed understanding of the British Museum's cultural initiatives and their impact on perceptions of the UK's nation branding.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the research's purpose and their rights. Confidentiality was maintained rigorously. Participation was voluntary, with participants free to withdraw at any time without consequence. All data, including transcripts and recordings, were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

4.4. Conclusion

This research methodology chapter has outlined the qualitative approaches used to comprehensively address the research question. By integrating document analysis with semi-structured interviews and employing thematic analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of how the British Museum's cultural initiatives shape public perceptions and influence nation branding. The methodological choices ensure a robust and reliable framework for exploring of the complex interplay between cultural heritage, colonial legacies, and nation branding. The dual methods offered a comprehensive view of how the museum navigates its role as an educator and custodian of contested histories, highlighting the need for ethical transparency and inclusivity in museum practices.

5. Document Analysis: The Exhibition Catalogue

The exhibition catalogue was published by the British Museum, and it is meant to accompany the exhibition of “Feminine Power: The Divine to the Demonic”, the original exhibition of “Venerades i Temudes” hosted in the British Museum in London from May 19th, 2022, to September 25th, 2022. Purportedly, the aim of the book is to delve into various female spiritual energies across ancient and contemporary cultures, examining their significance in the lives of people. Although the “Venerades i Temudes” exhibition held in

Barcelona offers a catalogue in Spanish and Catalan, this research analyses the original English catalogue from the London exhibition. The selection of this catalogue for the analysis was deliberate, as it avoids the language barrier that would have arisen from analyzing the catalogues available at the Barcelona exhibition, while providing a comprehensive overview of the exhibited artifacts and the curatorial vision behind the presentation. The book author and curator of the exhibition is Belinda Crerar, and it is prefaced by Mary Beard, who collaborated closely with the exhibition. The catalogue offers valuable insights into the thematic content and interpretive framework of the exhibition. Additionally, because the deities, spirits, and supernatural entities featured in the book have been extensively discussed in theological and academic circles, individuals from diverse religious communities, scholars, public speakers, and contemporary artists have offered their personal insights and interpretations. The book aims to offer a curated collection of spiritual beliefs spanning various cultures and historical epochs, organized into five thematic chapters. Chapter 1 delves into narratives concerning the genesis of life and the earth across diverse global cultures. Chapter 2 explores the diverse spiritual perspectives on sexuality and human desires. Chapter 3 examines malevolent female entities found in global belief systems. In chapter 4, the focus shifts to the portrayal of female figures embodying physical and mental fortitude and resilience. Lastly, chapter 5 reflects on the compassionate wisdom embodied by female figures, intertwining themes of safeguarding the vulnerable with notions of guidance and redemption (Crerar 2022).

The exhibition showcases 154 objects. Among these objects, several were created in regions that at some point in time have been under the control of the British Empire. However, only objects listed in the catalogue that were produced in former British colonies, protectorates and settlements will be singled out for the analysis. The choice to narrow down the focus to former British colonies, protectorates, and settlements is rooted in the literature's emphasis on

the significance and long lasting impact of British imperial in these territories, as these regions represent specific historical contexts characterized by direct British rule or control (Jackson 2013). Secondly, the literature underscores the importance of artifacts in museums as tangible symbols of cultural heritage and historical memory. Artifacts from former British colonies, protectorates, and settlements carry particular resonance and significance due to their direct connections to Britain's colonial past. These objects embody the complex legacies of imperialism, exploitation, resistance, and cultural exchange that characterize the history of British colonialism. Furthermore, the purpose of the present thesis is to investigate the role of the British Museum and its cultural diplomacy initiatives in shaping the UK's international reputation, particularly in light of its colonial history. Focusing exclusively on these types of artifacts aligns closely with this objective, as it allows for a targeted exploration of the British Museum's handling of colonial legacies and postcolonial narratives. By honing in on these specific territories, the research aims to provide a focused analysis of how the British Museum's cultural diplomacy efforts intersect with the complexities of colonialism, decolonization, and nation branding. However, it is important to note that the contested objects within the British Museum's collections reach beyond the territories under the British Empire. One notable example is the Elgin Marbles from Greece, which have been a source of resentment and tension between the two countries since 1983 (“The Parthenon Sculptures | British Museum,” n.d.). Also, the quantity of artifacts included in the collection from Egypt is significant, with 18 objects acquired between 1882 and 1922, but, because the North African country was not formally annexed into the British Empire and retained some Ottoman institutional structures, these pieces will be left out. While these artifacts hold significant cultural and historical importance, they fall outside the scope of this thesis, which focuses specifically on territories under British control, including colonies, protectorates, and settlements.

Following the order of the exhibition, in the “Creation and Nature” section, the first two artifacts from a former British settlement are a lintel from the 1830s-40s donated by Sir George Grey (figure 1), and a cloak from before 1887 donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Frank (figure 2). Both artifacts come from Aotearoa, New Zealand. The catalogue gives insights as to the spiritual value of the two pieces and what they represent. Additionally, it also specifies that the incorporation of Aotearoa New Zealand into the British Empire during the mid-1800s significantly disturbed traditional Māori social systems due to cultural dominance and the influence of Christian missionaries, impacting women's roles in society and spirituality. Additionally, European colonizers often emphasized male accomplishments and leadership in their historical narratives of the Māori, overlooking the contributions of women.



Figure 1: lintel made of wood and haliotis shell inlay from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 2: chief's cloak made of flax textile with taniko borders from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The next objects displayed are from India: Gaja-Lakshmi seated on a lotus flanked by elephants from 1780 (figure 3), purchased from Guy Counce, and a lamp supported by a figure of Lakshmi (figure 4), dating back to the 18th century, donated by Mrs. A.G. Moor. In this case the catalogue does not mention anything about how these objects were acquired in the first place or how British imperialism might have affected their presence in the museum's collection. The last piece from this section on creation and nature is a dish with a mythical being (possibly Mami Wata) (figure 5), made in the late 19th to early 20th century, donated by the Menendez family. In this case, the catalogue offers us more information regarding its provenance. The dish likely originated in Birmingham, but its decorations were probably made in the late 19th or early 20th century by Efik women in Old Calabar (now Nigeria). These decorative dishes held significant ritual and household roles, often presented as gifts during weddings or sold to missionaries and traders, notably from England. Consequently, many of these dishes are now housed in British collections.



Figure 3: painting of Gaja-Lakshmi with elephants from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 4: bronze lamp supported by a figure of Lakshmi from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 5: brass dish with punched ornament representing a mythical being from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The following part of the exhibition delves into passion and desire. In particular, two artifacts in this section are a Shiva Linga previously owned Dr George Witt (figure 6), and a painting depicting Krishna and Radha embracing on a terrace (figure 7). Both items originate from India and date back to the period between 1700 and 1900. Once again, the catalogue does not provide information on the acquisition history of these objects, nor does it address any potential colonial influences related to their presence in the collection.



Figure 6: sandstone sculpture of Shiva Linga from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

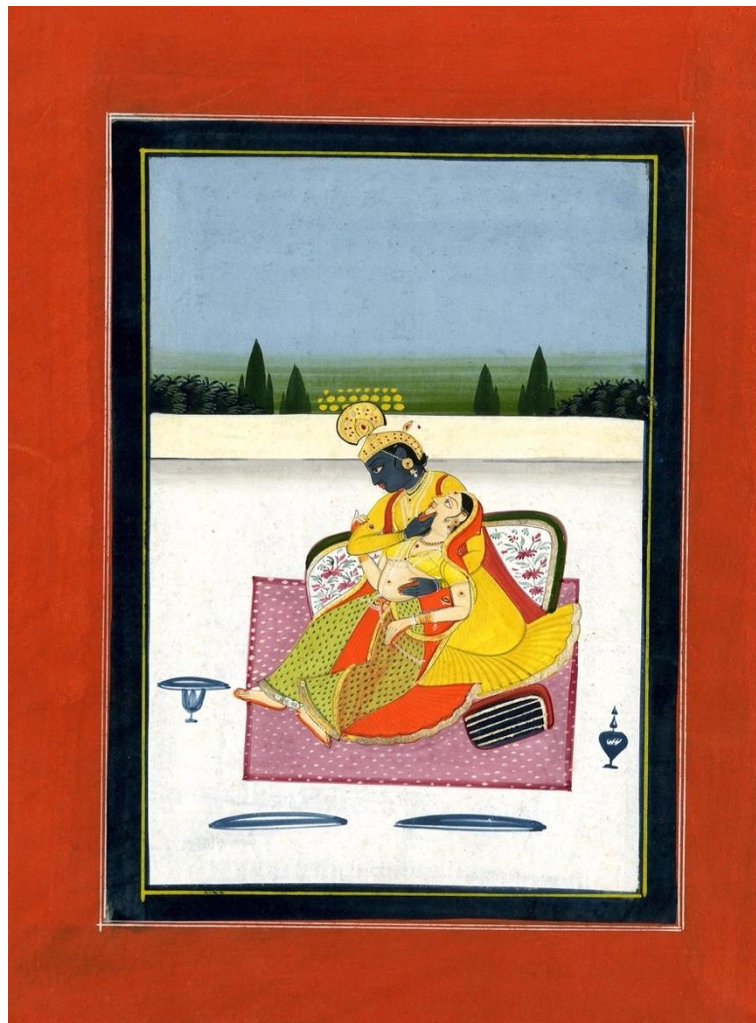


Figure 7: painting of Krishna and Radha from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The third section which explores the themes of magic and malice does not contain artifacts from any British colony, settlement or protectorates. Consequently, the catalogue refrains from delving in this topic.

In the fourth section focusing on Justice and Defence, three artifacts originating from a former British colony are featured. The first one is an effigy depicting Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahisha (figure 8) originating from 15th century India. The second artifact is an Indian effigy of Parvati dating back to the 10th century (figure 9). Lastly, this section showcases a figure of Chamunda from India dating back to the 11th century (figure 10). All of these effigies were donated by Mrs John Bridge, Miss Fanny Bridge and Mrs Edgar Baker. Notably, the catalogue remains silent on the acquisition history of these objects and neglects to explore any possible colonial influences affecting their inclusion in the collection.

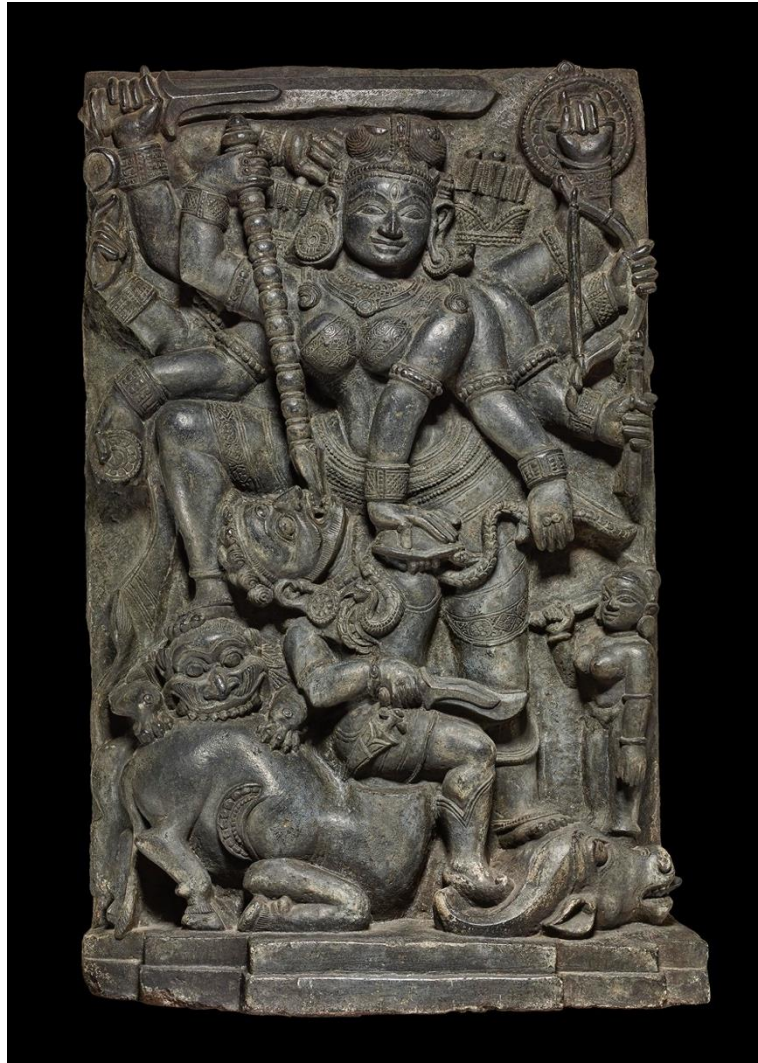


Figure 8: figure of Durgā killing the buffalo demon from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

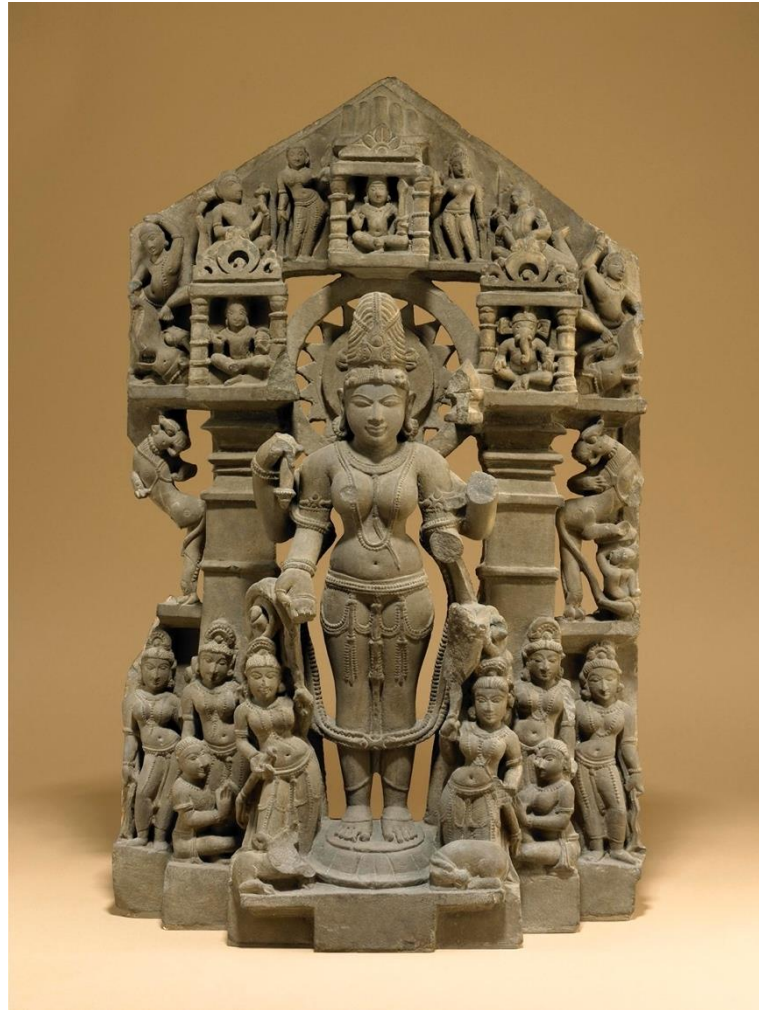


Figure 9: sandstone figure of Parvati from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 10: figure of Chamunda from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The concluding segment of the exhibition highlights artifacts that depict the compassionate and salvific roles played by female figures in spirituality. This concluding part prominently displays a Mughal painting portraying the Virgin and Child (figure 11), signed by Ghulám-i Sháh Salím, dating back to around 1610. In this instance, the book mentions that the presence of this artwork was made possible through funding from the Art Fund, however it does not specify whom it was purchased from.

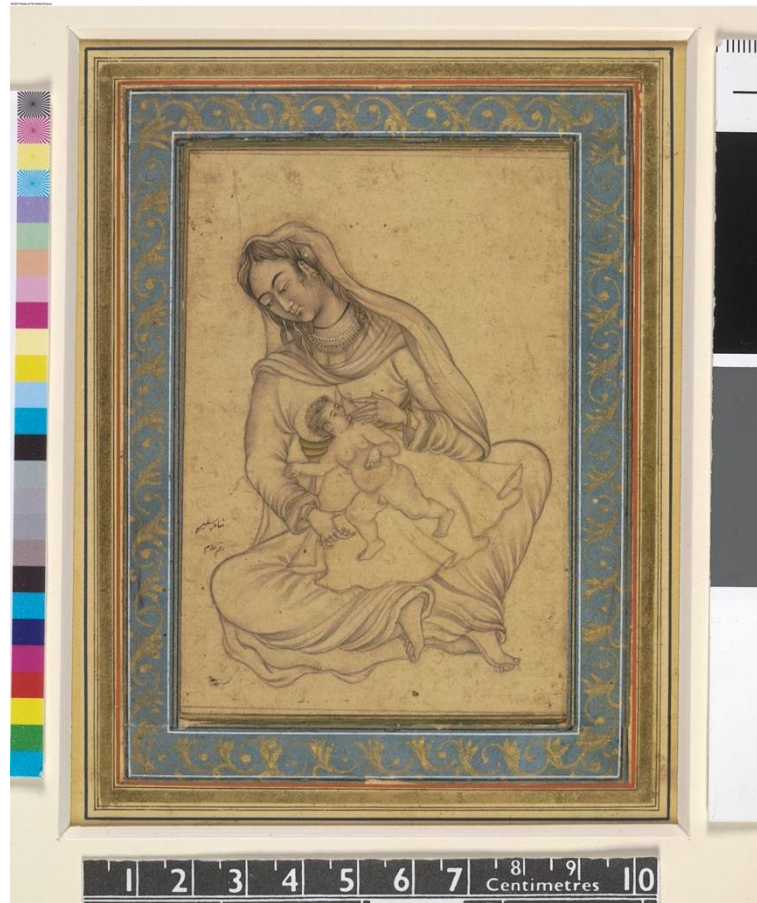


Figure 11: drawing of the Virgin Mary and child from the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Image licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The analysis of the exhibition catalogue provided significant insights regarding the type and origin of the artifacts showcased, and it offered a point of comparison between curatorial intent and museum realization. Additionally, it shed light on how the museum grapples with its colonial past and presents it to a global audience. Accordingly, a notable absence was observed throughout the book concerning the acquisition process of these artifacts and any potential implications of colonialism. Despite offering comprehensive details on the artifacts themselves and their stories and relevance to different cultures and peoples, the catalogue appeared to lack critical discussion or acknowledgment of the context in which they were acquired. This absence raises questions about the transparency and ethical considerations surrounding the procurement of these cultural objects, especially considering the declared

effort from the British museum of being more accountable in its presentation of history and cultural artifacts. This omission reflects a broader pattern that can often be observed in institutions, where certain aspects of history are selectively forgotten or ignored. Power dynamics play a crucial role in shaping historical narratives, often leading to the silencing and glossing over of inconvenient truths. By not addressing the contentious history of these artifacts, the British Museum seem to be contributing to a selective memory which can shape public perception in a way that overlooks the complexities of colonial legacies and reinforces a sanitized version of history, thereby perpetuating institutionalized ignorance and forgetting (Trouillot and Carby 2015).

The exhibition catalogue, to subtly downplay or obscure contentious aspects of the artifacts' histories, employs several rhetorical strategies of concealment. One such strategy is the use of euphemism, where the catalogue often uses softer language to describe the acquisition of artifacts. For example, terms like "donated" and "acquired" are employed without elaborating on the colonial contexts in which these donations and acquisitions occurred. This choice of words might serve to soften the potentially exploitative and coercive nature of these processes. Another strategy widely employed is selective omission. There is a notable absence of detailed discussion regarding the provenance and acquisition history of many artifacts. By omitting these details, the catalogue avoids engaging with the ethical and historical controversies associated with colonialism. Additionally, the catalogue frequently appeals to authority by referencing authoritative figures such as curators, scholars, and public figures to validate the cultural and spiritual interpretations of the artifacts. This appeal to authority lends credibility to the interpretations presented while diverting attention from the problematic aspects of the artifacts' histories. Positive framing is another rhetorical strategy used, where the artifacts are framed positively, emphasizing their spiritual and cultural significance for the communities that produced them. This positive framing effectively

redirects the reader's focus toward the value and importance of the artifacts, rather than the circumstances of their acquisition. Lastly, normalization is employed as a strategy where the catalogue presents the presence of these artifacts in the British Museum as normal and uncontroversial. By treating the display of these objects as a given, the catalogue implicitly suggests that there is nothing unusual or problematic about their inclusion in the museum's collection. By employing these rhetorical devices, the catalogue shapes a narrative that highlights the cultural and educational value of the artifacts while concealing the contentious aspects of their histories.

Finally, the fact that the catalogue and the exhibition repeatedly emphasize the spiritual value of the showcased objects for the communities that produced them is particularly significant, as it highlights the ethical imperative for the museum to engage in transparent dialogue about its acquisition processes and to acknowledge the complex histories and power dynamics involved in collecting cultural objects, especially those with colonial origins. The importance of such transparency and ethical reflection is underscored by the need for museums to critically reflect on their histories and practices to foster trust and accountability (Harrison 2013).

6. Perceptions of the British Museum: Heritage and Controversy

This section presents the findings from a series of interviews conducted to investigate public perceptions of the British Museum's role in cultural representation and its impact on the United Kingdom's image abroad. The interviews were aimed at understanding how the museum's history, particularly its colonial legacy, and its exhibitions, in this case the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition organized with Caixa Forum Barcelona, influence international views. Participants varied in age, nationality, and familiarity with the museum, providing a broad spectrum of insights.

The visitors' countries of origin are Italy, Spain, Lithuania, Montenegro, Slovakia and France, thus offering a diverse European representation in the sample. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 65 years old. Their backgrounds range from students and professionals to casual museum visitors, each offering unique perspectives on the museum's influence in the realms of cultural diplomacy and national branding. None of the participants work in museology, nor do they claim to have expertise in the field, making them amatorial museum goers. This lack of professional background may provide a more generalized public perspective on the museum's impact and practices.

The participants expressed a range of perspectives regarding the societal role of the British Museum. The museum was seen as both an educational resource and a narrator of cultural history. While many appreciated the museum's mission of offering free access to global civilizations and its role in broadening cultural understanding, this appreciation was tempered by a critical awareness of the museum's methods of acquiring its artifacts and its perceived lack of transparency. A participant from Slovakia encapsulated this duality by acknowledging the museum's educational contributions but criticizing its acquisition practices. The interviews suggest a growing expectation for museums to engage more transparently with the historical contexts of their collections and to actively participate in addressing injustices.

When asked what the British Museum evokes for them, most participants fondly recalled its extensive collections, showcasing artifacts from across the globe, whereas three of them immediately associated the British Museum with the controversies associated with these collections. This mixed reception of the vast collection of the museum is particularly striking considering that all participants, although at varying degrees, were aware of the imperial history of the institution. A couple of participants, for instance, conveyed a level of indifference when discussing the colonial implications of the museum. According to these

interviewees, the inclusion of such artifacts in the museum's collection serves as a historical lesson in and of itself, which illustrates how certain countries were “better” at preserving and retaining historical relics.

The majority of participants did not have an in-depth knowledge of specific controversies but were generally aware that many artifacts within the British Museum's collection have origins tied to Britain's colonial past. This awareness influenced their perceptions of the museum, introducing a layer of scepticism about the legitimacy of its holdings. One participant from France noted that while the museum serves as a custodian of immense historical value, it also embodies a painful reminder of colonial exploitation, comparing its standing with that of museums in their own country. This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that the museum's role in cultural representation was overshadowed by its historical actions.

This section of the interviews underscores a critical tension in public perceptions of the British Museum: it is both a revered educational institution and a controversial symbol of colonial history.

6.1. Perceptions of the British Museum's Role in Cultural Representation

The "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition, exemplifying a British cultural diplomacy effort, elicited a variety of responses from the interviewees. Most participants were particularly impressed by the thematic arrangement and the curatorial narrative, which brought to life the role of women in history through the displayed artifacts. Two participants from Italy expressed the contentment and surprise of seeing an exhibition which exclusively tackled women and their role in spirituality, noting that they have never experienced this kind of art in any other museum. The rich and diverse representation of women's experiences across different cultures and epochs was particularly noted for its depth and educational value. For example, one of the participants from Italy expressed being particularly satisfied

by the portrayal of female figures in historical contexts, highlighting how the exhibition reshaped their understanding of women's roles in historical narratives.

Interestingly, many participants found it difficult to associate the exhibition directly with the United Kingdom, noting a disconnect between the artifacts displayed and their British origins. This disconnection was partly due to the global nature of the artifacts, many of which originated from regions once under British colonial rule but did not explicitly connect back to British culture or history in the exhibition's narrative, while others found a language barrier, due to the fact that the panels found in the exhibition were written in Spanish and Catalan. For all participants, the exhibition reinforced their pre-existing views of the UK rather than altering them. Four participants noted that while the exhibition was well-executed artistically and educationally, it either echoed their existing critical perceptions of Britain's colonial history or failed to make a significant new impact on their views of the UK.

These reflections indicate that while the exhibition was successful as a cultural and educational initiative, its impact on shaping broader perceptions of the United Kingdom was rather limited. The lack of direct ties to British cultural identity or an acknowledgment of the controversial origins of many artifacts left some participants feeling that the exhibition, though informative and enriching, fell short in positively influencing their perceptions of the UK. This outcome highlights the challenges in leveraging cultural exhibitions to reshape or enhance national images, particularly when historical legacies and contemporary cultural identities are not addressed or reconciled within the exhibition narrative.

6.2. Controversies Surrounding Artefact Acquisition

Participants expressed varied levels of awareness and concern regarding the origins of artefacts held by the British Museum. The discussion frequently centred on the ethical implications of such acquisitions. For example, a participant from Lithuania, highlighted the controversial nature of many artefacts displayed in the museum, describing them as

reminders of Britain's colonial past. They articulated concerns over the legality and morality of how these artefacts were obtained, suggesting that their presence in the museum perpetuates historical injustices. Similarly, another interviewee was cognizant of the ongoing debates surrounding artefacts like the Elgin Marbles. They expressed frustration with the museum's handling of these items. Their remarks underscored a sentiment of unresolved historical grievances that taints the perception of the museum's legitimacy and ethical standing.

The interviews revealed a strong consensus on the need for greater transparency and ethical responsibility in how museums manage and display artefacts with colonial histories. Participants advocated for initiatives aimed at repatriation or at least the acknowledgment of the contentious histories of these objects. Two participants from Italy believed that museums have a duty to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation by providing clear provenance information, engaging with countries of origin and possibly returning artefacts.

A participant from France suggested that while the British Museum showcases a vast array of cultural artifacts, there should be more proactive efforts to educate the public about the complex histories of these items, including the circumstances under which they were acquired. He felt that museums should not only display artifacts but also actively participate in mending the historical narratives they represent.

The participants' feedback points to a broader expectation that museums not only serve as guardians of cultural heritage but also as ethical stewards that address historical wrongs. This perspective aligns with a growing public discourse on decolonization and ethical museology, suggesting that museums like the British Museum should evolve their practices to better reflect contemporary values of justice and reparations for historical transgressions.

6.3. *Reflections on Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power*

The participants offered diverse views on how exhibitions curated by the British Museum, particularly "Venerades i Temudes," influence the UK's national image. While the museum's intent may be to project an image of inclusivity and progressiveness, the feedback indicated that the connection between the exhibitions and a contemporary British identity remains tenuous at best. For instance, several participants recognized the exhibitions' educational value, and appreciated many of its features but felt that the displays did not adequately address the complexities of the UK's colonial legacy. Consequently, the exhibition was perceived as reinforcing an outdated narrative that predominantly reflects the UK's colonial history. This disconnect is particularly problematic in the context of cultural diplomacy, where the objective is often to enhance mutual understanding and foster international goodwill. The lack of effective communication and transparency about the origins of artifacts and the historical context of their acquisition undermines these goals, leaving a gap between the museum's potential as an agent of cultural diplomacy and its actual impact.

The interviews also highlighted a significant demand for improvements in museum practices, especially concerning transparency and engagement with artifact origins. Participants suggested that the British Museum should not limit itself to showing artifacts but also provide detailed narratives about their provenance and the historical conditions under which they were acquired. A participant from Spain, for example, proposed that artifacts should be accompanied by information regarding their original cultural contexts to enhance visitor understanding and appreciation.

Moreover, there is a call for museums to actively participate in discussions about repatriation and restitution, particularly for artifacts obtained under dubious circumstances. This approach would not only rectify historical wrongs but also position museums as ethical

stewards of cultural heritage. From one interview emerged that museums like the British Museum could play a pivotal role in cultural diplomacy by adopting more responsible practices that reflect a commitment to global cultural integrity and mutual respect.

6.4. Conclusion of Results

The findings from these interviews underscore the dual role of the British Museum as both a revered educational institution and a controversial custodian of artifacts acquired under the shadow of colonialism. These insights are instrumental in addressing the central thesis question: "How does the British Museum's handling of its colonial legacy impact its role in cultural diplomacy and affect its image both domestically and internationally?"

The interviews conducted revealed a complex perception of the British Museum and the reputation of Great Britain. While it is unanimously expressed that the museum's exhibits are undeniably rich in educational content, there remains a pervasive concern about the implications of artifact acquisition methods and the authenticity of the narratives presented, especially among the younger participants. One consistent theme was the scepticism regarding the museum's role in perpetuating historical narratives that are favourable to Britain's colonial past. This perspective frequently influences public perceptions, casting doubt on the sincerity of the museum's cultural initiatives. Many participants voiced a need for the museum to engage more transparently and meaningfully in addressing its historical legacies.

Despite the considerable awareness among participants of the British Museum's colonial reputation and their scepticism regarding the methods through which certain artifacts were acquired, there remains a notable willingness to visit the museum when in London. Two participants for example, while critical of the museum's past actions, expressed a curiosity and eagerness to experience its vast collections firsthand, as they recognize the educational and cultural value that such visits offer, providing them with direct exposure to art and

historical artifacts that are otherwise inaccessible. Furthermore, for many, these visits are seen as opportunities to critically engage with the narratives presented by the museum, allowing visitors to form their own informed opinions about the artifacts and their histories. This engagement is not only a testament to the enduring appeal of the British Museum as a cultural destination but also highlights the ongoing dialogue between the public and institutions on issues of ethical responsibility and historical representation.

In conclusion, the findings underscore an urgent need for museums to reevaluate how they manage and interpret artifacts with complex histories. For these institutions to genuinely contribute to cultural diplomacy and enhance their national images, a paradigm shift is necessary. Museums must embrace greater accountability, engage in substantive restitution discussions, and ensure that their exhibitions reflect comprehensive and truthful narratives that honour the dignity of all cultures.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study set out to investigate how cultural diplomacy efforts lead by an institution as influential and well known as the British Museum contribute to the nation branding of the UK, amid ongoing discussions of its colonial legacy. The research question that has guided the research stems from the role of the British Museum as both a custodian of global heritage and a vestige of colonialism. This dual identity presented a fundamental contradiction: while museums like the British Museum are traditionally seen as enhancers of a nation's soft power, their historical operations, including the acquisition of artifacts through colonial conquests, raise significant ethical concerns. Therefore, the research question posed was: "How do British Museum cultural initiatives shape visitors' perceptions of the UK's nation branding through its representation of heritage?".

To address this question, ten interviews were conducted with visitors at the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition, complemented by a thematic analysis of the exhibition catalogue. The document analysis of the exhibition catalogue "Feminine Power: The Divine to the Demonic" has provided insights into how the British Museum curates and presents its artifacts. This analysis reveals a careful curation of female spiritual energies across cultures and epochs, yet frequently omits critical discussions on the colonial processes through which many of these artifacts were obtained. This approach aligns with the museum's role in educating the public and enhancing cultural appreciation but falls short of addressing the ethical dimensions of artifact acquisition and colonial exploitation. The selective transparency observed in the catalogue can be seen as a strategic use of cultural diplomacy that emphasizes positive aspects of cultural heritage while minimizing contentious historical realities. This absence points to a broader issue within museum practices related to transparency and ethical responsibility in how history is presented, which is mirrored by the literature. Finally, the analysis reflects ongoing tensions between traditional museum practices and the demands of new museology, which advocates for a more inclusive and critical approach to museum curation. The British Museum's catalogue reflects a partial engagement with these newer approaches.

The findings from the interviews conducted with visitors of the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition reveal complex perceptions of the British Museum. While visitors recognize and appreciate the museum's role as an educational resource and a custodian of cultural history, this positive view is tempered by the awareness of the museum's colonial acquisition practices and lack of transparency, especially among younger interviewees.

As for the impact of the exhibition on the nation branding of the UK, "Venerades i Temudes", despite its educational and cultural value, did not significantly alter participants' perceptions of the UK. Mostly, the reason for this is because it did not effectively connect the

artifacts displayed to the British Museum or adequately address their controversial origins. Ultimately, no participant has expressed a reluctance wanting to visit London or the UK in general, as a consequence of the colonial past of its cultural institutions; in fact, some participants who have never been to the country expressed a keen interest in visiting the Museum.

These results seem to be partially aligned with the literature on nation branding. It has been established that for a nation to earn admiration, it must actively engage in meaningful discussions on issues people deem important. In the case of the British Museum, despite its colonial ties, the controversies related to its collections seem to not deter people from visiting. The museum's exceptional educational value appears to outweigh concerns about its controversial acquisitions. Many participants admired the unique insights into global cultures and histories that the Museum offers. This educational appeal significantly contributes to the UK's soft power, enhancing its image as a centre of historical and cultural knowledge. On top of this, the focus on feminine power of the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition was particularly well-received. This positive reception underscores the Museum's capacity to align its exhibitions with broader, socially relevant themes, thereby reflecting positively on the United Kingdom. This approach can serve to mitigate the negative impacts of historical controversies and to reinforce the UK's reputation as a forward-thinking and culturally rich nation, in line with Western values.

Nonetheless, there is a strong consensus among participants on the need for museums to manage and display artifacts with colonial histories more responsibly. Suggestions include greater transparency about artifact provenance, engagement in repatriation discussions, and active participation in rectifying historical narratives. These expectations are in line with scholarly calls for museums to evolve their practices to reflect a more just and equitable approach to handling historical legacies.

Overall, these results highlight several important implications for various stakeholders involved in museum management, cultural policy-making, and academic research. For museum practitioners, particularly those in institutions with colonial legacies like the British Museum, there is a clear need to enhance transparency about artifact provenance and actively engage in addressing and rectifying historical injustices. For decision makers in the cultural and governmental sectors, this research underscores the importance of supporting initiatives that enhance ethical practices in museums. Policy frameworks should also encourage museums to act as platforms for international dialogue that not only showcase cultural heritage but also foster global understanding and reconciliation.

Nevertheless, this study is not without its limitations. The primary limitation of this thesis stems from the scope of the empirical data, which is based on a relatively small sample of museum visitors which only include participants from Europe. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the wide range of perceptions and experiences among the general public. Additionally, the focus on a single exhibition may limit the generalizability of the conclusions to other contexts or exhibitions. Another limitation is the lack of direct input from museum staff or management, which could provide additional insights into the intentions and challenges faced by the institution.

Given these limitations, further research could expand the sample size and diversity of museum visitors to include a broader array of perspectives, potentially incorporating quantitative methods to complement the qualitative insights of this study. Additionally, future studies could explore comparative analyses across multiple museums with colonial legacies to identify common strategies and challenges in managing historical controversies. Furthermore, engaging directly with museum professionals and policymakers could also enrich the understanding of the operational and strategic dimensions of museum management. By addressing these areas, future research can offer more comprehensive

insights and recommendations that help cultural institutions like the British Museum navigate their complex roles in contemporary society.

To conclude, this research underscores the role that institutions like the British Museum play in shaping international perceptions. Museums can not only educate and inspire but also lead in the global dialogue on cultural reconciliation and ethical stewardship. As we look to the future, it is clear that museums hold the keys to bridging past and present, offering pathways to understanding that resonate across cultures and generations. This is contingent upon their adoption of practices that uphold the dignity of the cultures they represent and contribute to a more just and interconnected world.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Introduction and Warm-Up:

- Can you please tell me about your background and your relationship with museums?
- What role do museums play when you choose a travel destination?
- What do you believe is the significance of museums in representing cultural heritage?

2. Understanding Perceptions of the British Museum:

- How familiar are you with the British Museum?
- What comes to mind when you think of the British Museum?
- Can you elaborate on any specific thoughts or emotions that come to mind when you think about the British Museum and its role in representing cultural heritage?
- How do you perceive the colonial history of the British Museum, particularly in relation to its acquisition and display of cultural artifacts from colonized regions?

3. Impact of "Venerades i Temudes" Exhibition:

- What were your overall impressions of the content and presentation of the "Venerades i Temudes" exhibition?
- How do you think this exhibition contributed to shaping your perceptions of the UK?
- Can you share any specific experiences or impressions you had from attending the exhibition?

4. Nation Branding and Cultural Diplomacy:

- Do you believe initiatives like "Venerades i Temudes" align with the image or values that the UK seeks to portray abroad?
- Before this interview, have you heard of controversies surrounding the British museum and its colonial past?
- In your personal experience, how does the colonial legacy of the British Museum influence the reputation of the UK?
- Are there any specific aspects of "Venerades i Temudes" that you believe are particularly effective or noteworthy in terms of nation reputation?

5. Critique and Future Perspectives:

- Are there any criticisms or challenges you see in the way the British Museum conducts these kinds of cultural initiatives?
- Are there any specific areas where you believe the British Museum could enhance its cultural initiatives efforts, particularly in relation to exhibitions like "Venerades i Temudes"?
- Looking ahead, how do you envision the role of cultural initiatives evolving for the British Museum and its contribution to the national reputation of the UK?

6. Reflection and Final Thoughts:

- Is there anything else you would like to add or any final thoughts?