



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



Case Study 6: Museum of the Future

In this simulation students play the role of curator/researcher for the museum's next round of acquisitions. To prepare for the simulation students needed to understand the ways in which museums collect, display and interpret the objects.

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GAMEPLAY PREPARATION

LSE Simulations ■

INTRODUCTION:

This is an introductory guide to museum practices. It is not all-encompassing—rather, it explores how museums in the West, specifically in London, often operate. As such, the guide explores the ways in which museums collect, display, and interpret their objects. Use this guide as you like! Draw inspiration from what interests you, use the questions to brainstorm ideas about your object, or explore its interactive links.

MUSEUM GUIDE CONTENT

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WAYS OF COLLECTING

WHAT IS A MUSEUM COLLECTION?

Museum collections include objects and artefacts that are acquired, preserved and presented for public use, engagement and learning. Objects of a collection tend to carry certain cultural, historical, scientific and societal meaning that are important for the specific collections' mission. A collection can be used for research, critical debate and exhibition-making. Collections thereby work to 'assemble futures': telling stories about the present and the past for the future (see resource list for further reading).

WHY DO MUSEUMS COLLECT?

Museums collect to safeguard, care for, display and critically engage with socio-cultural histories and objects. This involves preserving things with certain cultural or social value, creating public-engagement with objects in exhibitions, serving communities, and expanding knowledge through enabling research. Provided that museums hold the power to safeguard culture for the future — what museums preserve is of big importance.

WHAT DO MUSEUMS COLLECT?

*Museums, established in a Western cultural context as “repositories of universal knowledge” in the late 19th century, carry complex and often violent colonial histories of collecting and cataloging artefacts from across the world. The 19th century museum, whose influence remains still today, often claimed ownership over objects and their representation in the name of safeguarding an ‘universal’ human culture. Meanwhile, when displacing these objects from community, museums have been critiqued to strip these objects from their original socio-cultural significance and place. This process, tend to perpetuate Eurocentric understandings of ownership over culture and right to define what is worth preserving. In response to these histories, contemporary museum practices have increasingly embraced social history and decolonial frameworks, expanding their approaches to collecting and interpreting objects (see resource list for further reading). Moving beyond the origins of the museum to explore its future potential, examples of objects that museums collect today include: **everyday artefacts** such as furniture, clothing, and other items reflecting ordinary life, **organic specimens** such as food, plants, and seeds, **technologies and science** such as machinery, electronics and medicine and **social history & movements** such as posters, protest banners, documents and artworks connecting social movements, important figures, or specific communities.*

Ways of Collecting__Case Study I: Museum of the Home

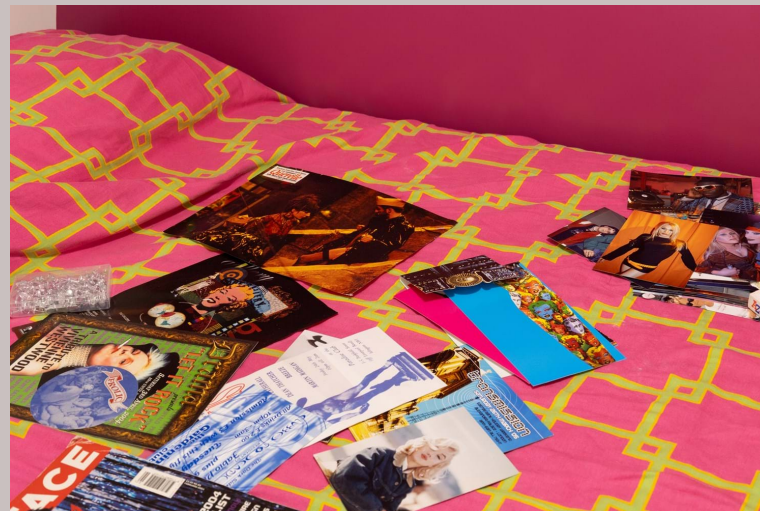
“Our collections offer a unique insight into what home means to different people, told through personal stories and everyday objects.”

Objects from the collection are displayed in the different museum exhibitions as well as their permanent display: “Rooms Through Time 1878-2049.” These are seven “period homes” reflecting different histories of the home and community in the past, present and future.

In the rooms, objects from the collection are displayed in their everyday context, in a form of set designed by the museum curators and invited members of the community.



More info:
<https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/explore/real-rooms/>



Ways of Collecting__Case Study II: Museum of Transology



“The Museum of Transology (MoT) is the UK’s most significant collection of objects representing trans, non-binary and intersex people’s lives.

Never again will historians be able to say that you can’t call trans people trans in the past. Never again will trans, non-binary and intersex people be hard to find in history. And never again will the records of our lives be written by the media that spectacularise us, the legal systems that criminalise and the psychiatrists who pathologise us.

With our own museum we will write ourselves back into history, on our own terms, in our own words.”

— <https://www.museumoftransology.com/about>



MOT is a museum that centres interactive community collecting. The collection consists of the donations from people within the trans community in the UK. When donating, the person receives a brown paper tag where they get the possibility to define their donated object on their own terms as the object becomes part of the collection.



UPCOMING EXHIBITION — March-May 2025 at Lethaby Gallery, Granary Square, London

Ways of Collecting__Case Study III: Svalbard Global Seed Vault



"The Seed Vault safeguards duplicates of 1,301,397 seed samples from almost every country globally, with room for millions more. Its purpose is to back up gene-bank collections to secure the foundation of our future food supply."

— <https://www.croptrust.org/work/svalbard-global-seed-vault/>



Explore the inside of the vault in this 'virtual tour':

<https://seedvaultvirtualtour.com/>



WAYS OF DISPLAYING

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DISPLAY IN A MUSEUM COLLECTION?

The ways objects are displayed in a museum collection shapes how viewers experience its story, context and value. Displays are used both to protect the object and to allow visitor interaction. The display acts as a bridge between the object and its viewer.

HOW ARE OBJECTS IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS USUALLY DISPLAYED?

Dating back to the 19th century museum tradition, object displays typically feature glass vitrines, plinths, or wall-mounted presentations. Here, objects are preserved behind glass, protected from visitors' touch. These displays traditionally organise items by timeline, theme, or geographical location. Critics have pointed out that such conventional displays tend to put objects out of place, out of time while also limiting interactivity and accessibility ([see resources for further reading](#)). Some other possible ways to display objects involve experimental vitrines, set-designs, interactive display, open-room displays, archival displays, sensorial displays and many more ([be creative!](#)) The examples in the following pages of this guide showcase both traditional and innovative display methods.

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON DISPLAY CONCERNS TO KEEP IN MIND?

- *How can object-displays be engaging and accessible?*
- *How can the display work to give justice to the object's socio-cultural history?*
- *How can colour, layout or space draw attention to the object?*
- *What senses and/or emotions does the display evoke?*

Ways of Display__Case Study I: The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) exemplifies a typical 19th-century museum showcasing design and decorative arts from across the world. Established shortly after the Great Exhibition of London in 1851, the museum embodies many of the principles of the 19th-century “encyclopedic” museum with core missions of public education, engagement, and display of cultural and artistic innovation at the time. Initiated by Prince Albert, the V&A was the first major project of South Kensington’s emerging “Exhibition Road” — an area that remains home to other museums like the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum.

The museum’s displays reflect traditional 19th-century exhibition practices largely informed by enlightenment ideas. Here, objects are displayed in glass vitrines with concise labels positioned below with a systematic approach to categorisation and presentation — arranged chronologically and by geographic origin.



The V&A offer self-guided trails that visitors can use to navigate the collection. For instance:

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/va-trails>

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/va-trail-britain-and-the-caribbean>

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/va-trail-out-in-the-museum>

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/va-trail-collection-highlights>

Ways of Displaying__Case Study II: V&A installation ‘Speculations on Capture’ by Morehshin Allahyari

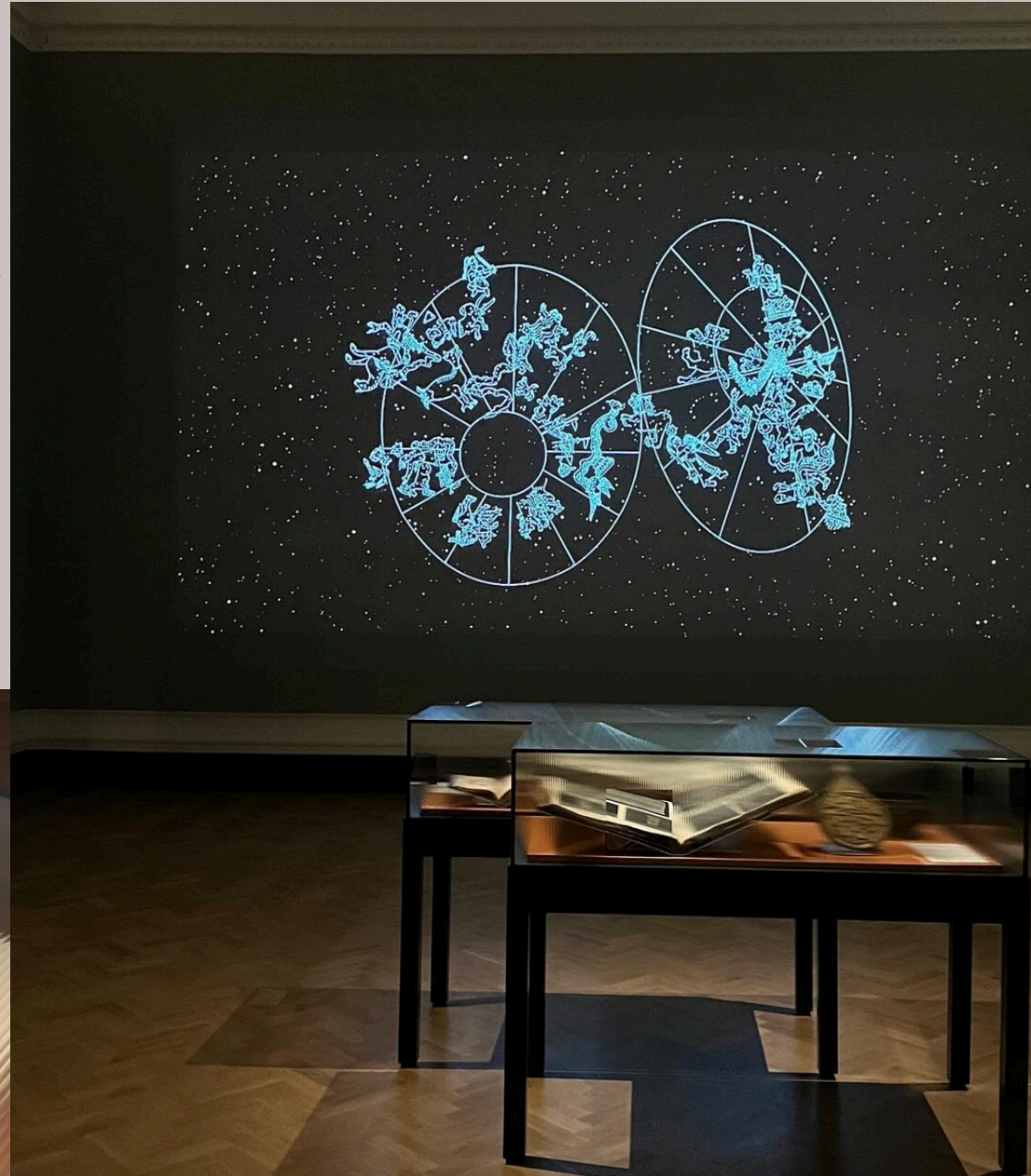
This temporary display at the V&A is a commissioned piece by artist Morehshin Allahyari. Part video, part vitrine, the installation follows an investigation of the V&A's imperial and colonial histories of unauthorised acquisitions of cultural objects as well as their displacement.

In the Video, Allahyari narrates her research into the fragmented histories of astronomical instruments made in Iran and Pakistan that are held at the V&A collection. Accompanying the video is a purposefully designed display case. While the displays are made to resemble traditional museum vitrines (as exemplified above), the artist has intentionally blurred the glass, making the objects only visible to the attentive observer. By both protecting and obscuring the objects inside, the artist re-appropriates the vitrine as display methods to unsettle long-held enlightenment exhibition-practices of rendering all objects ‘knowable’ through vision.



Installation is at the Photography Centre of the V&A and closes on Sunday 23 February (first weekend of reading week). Catch it before it closes!

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/event/>





Ways of Displaying__example III: V&A — Installation ‘Dream your museum’ by artist Ohida Khandakar

“Khandakar Ohida's Dream Your Museum (2022) is a film about the artist's uncle, Khandakar Selim, and his collection of more than 12,000 objects amassed over the past 50 years. From train tickets, perfume bottles and cameras, to ceramics, postcards and photographs, Selim sees value in things others discard.”

“Khandakar's film documents her uncle's collection as it was displayed in their traditional mud house in West Bengal, India, which has since been torn down.”

“Dream Your Museum counters the colonial museum model, instead inviting people to find value in the seemingly banal objects that are an intrinsic part of their lives.”

More info and text from: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/jameel-prize-moving-images>



Installation is displayed at the Jameel Art Prize Moving Image exhibition at the V&A until 16 March 2025.

WAYS OF INTERPRETING

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MUSEM LABLES AND INTERPRETATION?

Museum labels and texts help visitors engage with and learn from the displayed objects by revealing their background, context, and meanings. The role of these texts is to make knowledge accessible through creating engaging and meaningful connections between the collections, society, people and their communities. At their core, museum texts and labels should be both informative, engaging and accessible.

WHAT DOES A MUSUEM TEXT OR LABEL USUALLY INVOLVE?

Generally, museum labels should provide context, tell stories, and invite exploration. As such, these texts have the potential to reveal broader narratives about each object. Starting with an object's origins, a label can describe how it was used, its importance to society, or its personal history. Museum labels have faced criticism for using inaccessible language—often called “art jargon”—and for being written from positions of authority rather than by people from the communities these objects relate to (see resource list). Some museums have challenged traditional interpretation methods by changing their writing style, letting communities write about their own objects, and offering visitors multiple types of text to engage with.

SOME GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR WRITING A MUSEUM LABEL:

- *How was the object created? When was it created? By whom was it created?*
- *Why is this object meaningful? To whom is / was the object meaningful?*
- *How does the object carry meaning up to this day?*

Ways of Interpreting__Case Study I: Wellcome Collection

The Wellcome Collection is a museum and library dedicated to exploring ideas around health. In their collection, you can find objects relating to health, medicine and human experience across time and place.

They have made accessible their full museum guides and texts online for both permanent and temporary exhibitions. In the galleries they offer visitors museum guidebooks, as well as each object displayed accompanied by an informative label. For example, see these two exhibitions:



Being Human (permanent exhibition)

“This gallery explores how we think and feel about ourselves, our bodies and our relationship with the world around us.”

SEE FULL CAPTIONS HERE: <https://wellcomecollection.org/being-human>



Hard Graft: Work, Health and Rights (until 27 April 2025)

“Delves into the stories of underrepresented workers and their rights within precarious and unsafe labour environments. From protests to healing practices, the exhibition unveils hidden histories of resistance and collective action.”

SEE FULL CAPTIONS HERE: <https://wellcomecollection.org/guides/exhibitions>



WELLCOME EXAMPLES:



EXAMPLE 1: Being Human Display

DNA editing kit. DIY Bacterial Gene Engineering CRISPR Kit, The Odin.
Source: Wellcome Collection. Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Don't try this at home! This kit claims to include everything you would need to edit DNA. Biohacking collective The Odin sell this kit, which enables purchasers to use a technique called CRISPR to edit DNA. The kit, which is sent by post, claims to contain everything needed for CRISPR editing, including E coli bacteria. Kits like this one raise questions: as science moves outside the laboratory and becomes more accessible, who do we trust? How comfortable are we with this freedom?

Found here: <https://wellcomecollection.org/being-human-captions#being-human>



EXAMPLE 2: Hard Graft Display

No Rest for the Wicked, Kelly O'Brien, 2022-ongoing, Hard Graft Exhibition at Wellcome Collection, Gallery Photo: Steven Pocock, 2024

In her work, Kelly O'Brien documents the working-class women in her family, playfully exploring the performance of low-paid cleaning work. Moving from intimate portraits to staged photography of her mother and grandmother, she also explores her own identity as a third-generation Irish immigrant. Concerned with class, politics and gender, O'Brien's work questions the effect of work and working-class life on the body.

Found here: <https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/hard-graft-work-health-and-rights>

Ways of Interpreting__Case Study II: Migration Museum



“The Migration Museum explores how the movement of people to and from the UK across the ages has shaped who we are – as individuals, as communities, and as nations.”

In exhibitions like “Taking Care of Business: Migrant Entrepreneurs and the Making of Britain” and “Heart of the Nation: Migration and the making of NHS,” the museum explores archives and object-stories often from the perspective of personal migration narratives.

More info:

<https://www.migrationmuseum.org/about-our-project/>

Current exhibition: All Our Stories – Migration and the Making of Britain (12 September 2024-20 December 2025) at their space in Lewisham Shopping Centre

Link to explore exhibition “Taking Care of Business: Migrant Entrepreneurs and the Making of Britain” online:
<https://takingcareof.migrationmuseum/>

Link to explore exhibition “Heart of the Nation: Migration and the making of NHS” online:
<https://heartofthenation.>



MIGRATION MUSEUM EXAMPLES:



EXAMPLE 2: Taking Care of Business Exhibition

Corner Shop, curated and narrated by Babita Sharma

I am a corner-shop kid. We – a family of five – ate, slept, lived and worked in the shop. We served you and you gave us business, but there was a world beyond the counter that you never knew.

Perhaps your local shopkeeper resembles my mum and dad: born in India, they were shopkeepers for more than 20 years. Whoever it is, they have taken on a role that remains firmly entrenched in British life.

The shop on the corner evolved as a way to service communities in post-war Britain and became something much more significant: any family taking on the corner shop was instantly propelled into the frontline of community life...

Read full text:

<https://takingcareofbusiness.migrationmuseum.org/corner-shop/>

Resource List:

Museums & Collections (London + online)

Case studies:

Museum of the Home: <https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/>

Museum of Transology: <https://www.museumoftransology.com/>

Svalbard Seed Vault: <https://www.croptrust.org/work/svalbard-global-seed-vault/>

Victoria and Albert Museum: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections?type=featured>

The Wellcome Collection: <https://wellcomecollection.org/>

Migration Museum: <https://www.migrationmuseum.org/>

Additional:

Bishopsgate Institute and Archive: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>

British Museum: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/>

Huntarian Collection: <https://hunterianmuseum.org>

John Soane Museum: <https://www.soane.org>

Kew Gardens: <https://www.kew.org>

Museum of Neoliberalism:
<https://www.spellingmistakescostlives.com/museumofneoliberalism>

Palestine Heirloom Seed Library: <https://viviensansour.com/Palestine-Heirloom>

Science Museum: <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/home>

The Feminist Library: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/>

Vagina Museum <https://www.vaginamuseum.co.uk>

Further Readings:

Bottesi, Anna (2021) Are Museums Allowed to Keep a Secret?: Secret and Sacred Objects at the Weltmuseum Wien. *Museum Worlds*, 9(1), 53-67.

<https://doi.org/10.3167/armw.2021.090105>

Cameron, Fiona (2018) 'Posthuman Museum Practices,' In R. Braidotti & M. Hlavajova (Eds.), *Posthuman Glossary* (pp. 349-352).

Clavo, M.I. (2014) 'Statues also die, even... Time and Agency of Museum Display', *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 1. DOI: 10.54533/StedStud.vol001.art10.

Clifford, James (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century ethnography, literature and art*.

Edwards, Elizabeth et. al (2006) Introduction: Sensible Objects, in Edwards, E. et al. (2006) *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*. London: Routledge.

Hicks, Dan (2020) Chapter 1: The Gun that Shoots Twice, in Hicks, D. (2020) *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution* (pp.1-17). London: Pluto Press.

Hudson Hick, David (2019) 'Using Things as Art' *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 96(1), 56-80.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/18756735-000060>

Golding, Viv (2013) Chapter 1: 'Collaborative Museums: Curators, Communities, Collections,' in Golding, V. And Modest, W. (2013) *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, (pp.13-31). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Robenalt, Erica (2024) 'Introduction: The Queer Museum,' in Robenalt, E. (2024) *The Queer Museum: Radical Inclusion and Western Museology*. London: Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003407645>

Other tools:

Ethical Toolkit for Museum Collecting:

<https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/contemporary-collecting-toolkit-2/>

Debate on repatriation and decolonising the museum:

The director of the V&A Tristram Hunt's opinion piece in the Guardian 2019:

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jun/29/should-museums-return-their-colonial-artefacts>

Sumaya Kassim's response to the article 2019: <https://medium.com/@sumayakassim/the-museum-is-the-masters-house-an-open-letter-to-tristram-hunt-e72d75a891c8>

Heritage Futures — interactive webpage for ideas around collecting and preservation:

<https://heritage-futures.org/>

Documentary film: Dahomey

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/oct/27/dahomey-review-mati-diop-exquisite-tale-of-repatriation-atlantics>

Museum Association — Acquisition Guidance on the ethics and practicalities of acquisition:

https://archive-media.museumsassociation.org/ethicalguidelines_acquisitions.pdf

Museum Association — Code of Ethics for Museums:

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/code-of-ethics/#>

Collections Trust: 'What do Museums do with new objects' — short video case study

<https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/what-do-museums-do-with-new-objects/>