



# Historical Artifacts as Markers of Organizational Identity in the Communication of Cultural Heritage Museums

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## Abstract

Nowadays, museums face growing challenges regarding the representation of the past, the management of heritage in the present, and the construction of collective identities for the future, all of which are shaped by communication and technology. This research aims to analyze historical artifacts as markers of organizational identity in the communication of a museum that safeguards cultural heritage. It is based on the proposition that the identification of historical artifacts that form part of museum collections can be considered markers of identity within the institution that houses them. Using a qualitative single-case study methodology within the constructivist paradigm, the research is conducted at a private museum that safeguards tangible cultural heritage with high symbolic significance. Interviews are conducted with the museum's senior management and specialists to identify the symbols that serve as markers, in relation to its physical and digital spaces, and their connection with the visiting public. In conclusion, historical artifacts are not merely material vestiges of the past, but symbolic markers of identity that can trigger memories, reinforce a sense of belonging, or open spaces for critical reflection within their communities. This study demonstrates that museums play a key role in the negotiation of the past and the shaping of collective identities. Their responsibility is not only to preserve, but also to reinterpret and redefine, through new communication processes.

**Keywords:** historical artifacts, organizational identity, museums, cultural heritage, communication processes, digitization

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Context

Today, museums face growing challenges regarding the representation of the past, the management of heritage in the present, and the construction of collective identities for the future, all of which are linked to the work of memory [1]. These challenges have also been evolving due to disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused significant disruption on a global scale.

In response to this event, some organizations adjusted their mission and vision statements to emphasize their sense of identity and commitment [2]. For cultural organizations, the pandemic led to the closure of many venues, in addition to the ongoing social,

political, environmental, technological, and organizational pressures within their own sector [3]. In Latin America, as in the rest of the world, the pandemic disrupted the normal operations of cultural organizations and institutions, altering certain dynamics within their processes according to their specific contexts and prompting a reassessment of their very role in society [4]. Cultural heritage entered a crisis following the closures of galleries, archives, museums, and libraries [3]. This is why it is important to study the sector based on the heritage it safeguards and the new approaches to managing it.

## **1.2 Definition of the research problem**

In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, efforts were made to support the cultural sector through the *Reactiva Cultura* programs offered by the Peruvian government [5]. Cultural institutions such as museums took advantage of this support to strengthen their internal and external processes, focusing on digitizing certain collections to showcase them on their digital platforms. This study focuses on analyzing the role of historical artifacts displayed in museums as active elements in the construction and reaffirmation of collective identities.

Within the ecosystem of cultural management, museums face the challenge of representing cultural diversity and the complexity of historical memories in an equitable and critical manner [6,1] The selection, conservation, and exhibition of artifacts are not neutral processes, but rather political decisions that can reinforce or challenge national, ethnic, or local identities, not only from the institutional side but also through their own relationships with stakeholders, creating narratives of legitimacy [7]. Therefore, the central question guiding this research is: How do historical artifacts function as markers of organizational identity in the communication of museums that safeguard cultural heritage?

The starting point is the proposition that the identification of historical objects that form part of museum collections can be considered markers of organizational identity within the institution that houses them. Thus, it is further posited that museums that integrate community-based and participatory perspectives into the management of their heritage are more effective at strengthening a sense of belonging and diverse identities than those that reproduce univocal narratives of the past.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Organizational Identity in museums**

Organizational identity is based on what is central, distinctive, and enduring [8,9], which means understanding the characteristics that persist within cultural institutions and what makes them distinctive to the public that visits them. Ravasi and others [10] show us how organizations use their history and material memory to construct identities

and guide future actions, from a European perspective and from the perspective of corporate museums, in terms of how historical artifacts redefine and communicate new identities based on their own reinterpretations of iconic artifacts from their own brands.

## **2.2 Collective memory**

Since Maurice Halbwachs's seminal work [11], memory has been understood not as an individual act but as a socially mediated process. A distinction is made between communicative memory and cultural memory [6], with the latter being embedded in enduring symbols such as artifacts and monuments. For our study, we are interested in exploring cultural memory, which constitutes a form of institutionalized and objectified memory, anchored in enduring material and symbolic supports. From this perspective, the museum emerges as a privileged agent of cultural memory, as it selects, preserves, and legitimizes certain objects and narratives as authorized bearers of the past they safeguard [9].

In museological terms, artifacts and monuments do not function solely as material vestiges, but as semiotic devices that condense socially constructed values, identities, and interpretive frameworks [12]. What role do digital technologies play in the work of memory? According to the sources, digital technologies play a fundamental and transformative role in the work of memory [1], acting as mediators that allow the past to be represented in novel ways and project a renewed institutional image.

## **2.3 Identity and heritage**

Identity is conceived as a dynamic construct, shaped by history, power, and representation [13]. Cultural heritage [14] is not simply a legacy of the past, but a discursive practice that involves processes of inclusion and exclusion. Smith [15] argues that identity is constructed through authorized heritage discourses, which privilege certain narratives, values, and subjects while silencing or marginalizing others. In this sense, identity does not emerge from the objects or monuments themselves, but from the interpretive processes through which they are imbued with meaning. Heritage—and by extension the museum—operates as a performative space, where narratives are articulated that define who belongs, who is represented, and under what conditions. From the field of museology, this conception implies understanding that exhibitions, curatorial scripts, and interpretive strategies not only represent identities but actively produce them.

## **2.4 Critical museology**

Bennett [16] provides a historical analysis of the emergence of the modern museum as part of a set of technologies of governance characteristic of modernity. Inspired by Michel Foucault, Bennett argues that the museum functions as a space of symbolic indoctrination, where knowledge, visibility, and spatial order come together to shape behaviors, sensibilities, and forms of citizenship, as well as to organize gazes, hierarchize knowledge, and establish implicit norms regarding what should be seen, understood, and valued. On the other hand, Hooper-Greenhill [17] conceives of the museum

as a discursive space, in which knowledge is constructed through historically and socially situated interpretive practices. Hooper-Greenhill [17] challenges the positivist and authoritarian model of the traditional museum, proposing a post-disciplinary, reflective, and visitor-centered museology. From this perspective, exhibitions are open cultural texts, subject to multiple interpretations, where the authority of the expert is challenged by the experiences, knowledge, and memories of the public. “New museology” advocates for participatory models, where communities have agency over the narratives constructed from their objects. Both authors agree that critical museology must problematize the relationships between power, knowledge, and representation, revealing how museums produce authoritative versions of history, culture, and identity.

### **3 Methods**

#### **3.1 Type of research design chosen and justification**

The study was conducted within the social constructivist paradigm [18], as the reality of this research is understood through the lens of the people involved in museum dynamics and the public they serve, using a qualitative approach [19]. A single-case study design was chosen [20] and the research methods employed were semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and literature review [21].

The study focuses on a local museum that preserves tangible cultural heritage with high symbolic significance, particularly in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts—characteristics inherent to the Global South. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 40 minutes and participant observation.

#### **3.2 Case selection criteria**

One of the private museums in Peru’s capital was contacted. For the analysis, four iconic pieces were identified as emblematic works, establishing a basic tour route featuring distinctive elements located in a specific area of the museum. These icons were related to four thematic areas: pre-Columbian ceramics, colonial art, Republican art, and modern art. This selection reflects a curatorial categorization based on an initial identification of pieces suitable for a practical tour for domestic and international tourists who have limited time for their visit and wish to see some of the museum’s most iconic pieces, which are integral to the institution’s own identity.

#### **3.3 Participant selection criteria**

Selection criteria focused on staff members directly involved in activities across all levels of the museum. The study participants were museum directors and specialists, a

total of 15 people, who had an employment relationship with the museum before, during, and after the pandemic. The data collection period was from June to November 2025. A semi-structured interview guide and a questionnaire were used to define the museum's characteristics based on the collections it houses.

**Table 1.** Participant selection criteria

| Code | Position          | Museum Area              | Occupation          | Gender | Age |
|------|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------|-----|
| C1   | Director          | General Direction        | Visual Artist       | F      | 45  |
| C2   | General Manager   | General Management       | Industrial Engineer | M      | 43  |
| C3   | Head              | Administration           | Industrial Engineer | M      | 50  |
| C4   | Head              | Human Resources          | Psychologist        | F      | 45  |
| C5   | Head              | Library                  | Art Historian       | F      | 36  |
| C6   | Coordinator       | Educational Projects     | Tourism             | F      | 45  |
| C7   | Head              | Conservation Workshop    | Art Historian       | F      | 41  |
| C8   | Head              | Registration and Library | Art Historian       | F      | 41  |
| C9   | Coordinator       | Museum Programs          | Administrator       | M      | 35  |
| C10  | Coordinator       | Curatorship              | Arquitectura        | M      | 36  |
| C11  | Head              | Communications           | Plastic Artist      | F      | 51  |
| C12  | Curator           | Curatorship Colonial Art | Art Historian       | M      | 45  |
| C13  | Head              | Accounting               | Accountant          | M      | 50  |
| C14  | Education Manager | Education Area           | Industrial Engineer | M      | 48  |
| C15  | Coordinator       | Curatorship              | Art Historian       | F      | 37  |

In accordance with ethical guidelines, participants' names have been replaced with codes. For example, C1: Collaborator 1.

## 4 Results

A case study of a museum in Lima, Peru, reveals some interesting patterns. In the case studied, the inclusion of objects as icons has helped bring historical memories to light, promoting plural identities (20th century). Differentiating styles and periods in the identification of icons has been a success, establishing a positioning mechanism similar to that of first-world museums, where the limited time available for a visit allows the public to seek out "the representative piece" or "the representative period." Furthermore, the dissemination of the pieces is not limited to physical spaces but extends to digital ones, which enriches their recognition not only by the institution's own staff but also by domestic and international visitors.

The following pieces, selected according to their respective periods, are as follows:

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**Fig. 1.** Pre-Columbian pottery. Cupisnique (1500 - 500 B.C.). Bottle representing a contortionist. Private Museum of Lima.



**Fig. 2.** Anonymous artist from Cuzco. Three-Faced Trinity. ca. 1750–1770. Oil on canvas. Private Museum of Lima.



**Fig. 3.** Luis Montero (Piura, 1826 - Callao, 1869). The Funeral of Atahualpa, 1867. Oil on canvas. Private Museum of Lima.



**Fig. 4.** Joaquín López Antay (Ayacucho, 1897–1981). Portable Altar, ca. 1970–1980. Wood and polychrome plaster. Private Museum of Lima.

The strategy used to identify the pieces is further supported by cultural mediation efforts, which not only present the piece within its context but also allow for a playful dynamic to be established with it during visits. As a reference, the museum has a partnership with the Peruvian University of Applied Sciences; thanks to the “Cultural Passport” program, students from that institution participate in a guided tour, and as part of the tour’s conclusion, they can engage in “representations of what they see” within one of the iconic paintings, such as the funeral of Atahualpa (Fig. 3), understanding the situation and bringing it into the current context (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Guided Tour for College Students, 2022. Faculty of Communications. Peruvian University of Applied Sciences.

In contrast, for example, in some European museums of colonial history, artifacts extracted from colonized contexts continue to be exhibited without a critical examination of their provenance, thereby reproducing Eurocentric narratives.

Furthermore, the results show that narrative contextualization and museographic mediation (such as curatorial texts, guides and digital tools, branding, and communication materials) have a decisive influence on how visitors interpret objects and connect them to their own memories and identities. Museums that adopt participatory methodologies, such as collaborative curation or the inclusion of community oral histories, achieve greater symbolic appropriation by the public.

As collaborator 1 says: *"That's why we launched the 'iconization' campaign, and our strategy was to highlight key works from each historical period. This campaign is carried out in collaboration with the marketing department, as well as the education, curatorial, outreach, and communications departments, to develop a visitor experience centered on the permanent collection"*. (C1, 2026). This collaborative work allows for broader communication to the public in a more focused way, using both physical and digital elements to disseminate this heritage.

On the other hand, the need to group the icons and give them meaning stems from the reflections of the museum's members, as collaborator 12 tells us: *"I think one of the problems the museum has is that there are many very different pieces... For example, for the visitor, the tourist, the typical foreign tourist, it's a very large museum. And it's a very widespread experience."* (C12, 2026).

The curatorial work goes hand in hand with finding meaning within the institution's objectives, as collaborator 15 commented: *"Each year we have a clear objective to know which pieces [are] incorporated [as icons]. Let's say, next year we have a specific exhibition and we see which pieces of representative culture we have...and it is presented to the Committee so that they can vote and that piece is incorporated."* (C15, 2026)

The communication processes, starting with the identification of the pieces, converge both within the museum space itself and in physical and digital products, as collaborator 11 explains: *"With those four pieces, you can get a great idea of what the history of Peruvian art is about, or the layout of the museum's second floor. The second floor is square; the layout is like a corridor, almost like a timeline that goes all the way around. Those are the four iconic works that everyone should know are here. And that's what we've done, let's say...creating merchandising products, campaigns, communications, signage, and so on..."* (C11, 2026)

Cultural mediation processes are vital for identifying markers of identity. This was evident from the mediation experiences developed as part of the "Cultural Passport" program managed by the museum in partnership with the Peruvian University of Applied Sciences, in which students take guided tours with a mediator, learning about and

recognizing one of the museum's iconic works and engaging in an activity that reimagines the scene depicted in the painting.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Historical artifacts as active markers of organizational identity**

The findings of this study confirm and expand upon Albert and Whetten's [8] postulates regarding organizational identity as that which is central, distinctive, and enduring within an institution. In the case analyzed, the four artifacts referred to as "icons" function not merely as collectibles, but as markers that encapsulate distinct historical periods (pre-Columbian, colonial, republican, and modern) and project a narrative of Peruvian cultural continuity. This aligns with the proposals of Ravasi, Rindova, and Stigliani [10], who demonstrate that organizations use their history and material memory to construct identities and guide future actions. The "icons" campaign, jointly promoted by the marketing, education, curatorial, outreach, and communications departments (C1, 2026), constitutes, in this sense, a deliberate practice of managing organizational identity through its collections, where the artifact transcends its material condition to become a semiotic device that, as Coraiola et al. [12], condenses socially constructed values, identities, and interpretive frameworks.

### **5.2 Institutionalized cultural memory and the mediating role of digitization**

The results support Assmann's [6] distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory, demonstrating that the museum acts as a privileged agent of the latter by selecting, preserving, and legitimizing objects as authorized bearers of the past. This aligns with the theoretical premise that digital technologies play a transformative role in the work of memory [1], acting as mediators that enable the past to be represented in novel ways. In the case study, C11 (2026) clearly illustrates how the four emblematic artifacts simultaneously integrate merchandising products, communication campaigns, internal signage, and digital representation, thereby encompassing both physical and virtual spaces within a coherent system of meaning based on the institution's identity.

### **5.3 Participatory cultural mediation as a strategy for symbolic appropriation**

The "Pasaporte Cultural" program, developed in partnership with the Peruvian University of Applied Sciences, is a concrete example of the participatory museology proposed by Hooper-Greenhill [17], in which the museum is conceived as an open discursive space. This reinforces the critical perspective of Bennett [16], who conceives the museum as a technology of governance that organizes perspectives and hierarchizes knowledge, but suggests that, when this technology is oriented toward community participation, it can become a space for critical reflection and inclusion. The findings also align with Smith [15] in that identity does not emanate from the objects themselves, but rather from the interpretive processes through which they are endowed with meaning;

in this case, cultural mediation acts as the mechanism that activates this production of collective meaning.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

First, since this is a single-case study conducted at a private museum in Lima, Peru, the findings have a limited contextual scope and cannot be directly generalized to other types of museums. Second, the sample of 15 participants—limited to management and specialized staff—excludes the perspective of the visiting public, whose experience with iconic artifacts is a central component in the construction of collective identities. Finally, the selection of four emblematic pieces as units of analysis, although justified by curatorial criteria, may limit our understanding of the identity complexity of a collection that spans multiple periods and cultural traditions.

### **6 Conclusions**

To conclude this presentation, and in response to the overarching question that has guided this research, historical artifacts are not merely material remnants of the past, but symbolic markers of identity that can trigger memories, reinforce a sense of belonging, or open up spaces for critical reflection. In the context of museums, these objects function as catalysts for discourses of identity, always mediated by institutional frameworks and curatorial practices that are tailored to the spaces, the context, and the institutions that house them.

Drawing on Assmann [6] proposal, and with the respective updates to the International Council of Museums [22] own conceptualization of the museum, we can understand the museum not only as a repository of objects but as a cultural technology of memory, in which artifacts and monuments function as symbolic anchors that ensure historical continuity, while engaging in dialogue with living memories that challenge and transform their meaning. New technological processes, mediated by digitization and the use of digital platforms [23] are the resources that are used within the communication process scheme of these memory institutions.

This study demonstrates that museums play a key role in negotiating the past and shaping collective identities. Their responsibility is not only to preserve, but also to reinterpret and redefine meaning. To this end, a museology committed to cultural diversity, historical justice, and community participation is essential. Only in this way can historical artifacts contribute to an inclusive collective memory and to a citizenry more aware of its plurality and its sustainability over time.

#### **Future research directions**

It would be valuable to broaden the perspective by including the voices of visitors—both domestic and international—through mixed-methods approaches that combine in-

depth interviews with analyses of digital engagement. Second, a comparative study of museums of different types (public, private, and community-based) and in different Latin American contexts would allow us to examine how funding, governance, and mission statements influence the processes of identifying and communicating heritage. Similarly, the digital dimension opens up an emerging field of study: it is necessary to investigate how digital mediation platforms and tools—such as virtual tours, augmented reality, and social media—reshape the experience of the artifacts and its ability to evoke collective memories and identities beyond the museum's physical space

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