

Mapping the Role of Museums in Memory-Making and Memory-Retention: A Scoping Review of Practices, Narratives, and Visitor Engagement Strategies



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Abstract In the eighteenth century, museums were created by scholars and intellectuals who wanted to preserve history and culture. Over the years, museums have progressively evolved past their traditional role of acting as an archival institution to preserve history and culture and being active agents of education to being a tourism hotspot and a memory institution. However, the processes of memory-making and memory-retention lack clarity and are methodologically inconsistent. This scoping review aims to explore interdisciplinary research on how historical and cultural-centric museums facilitate memory outcomes (memory-making and memory-retention) through different factors such as curatorial strategies, narrative framing and visit engagement practices. Using the PRISMA-ScR framework, which draws literature across different fields such as museum studies, tourism, memory theories and psychology, a total of 33 articles from the databases Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), dated between 2000 and 2025, revolving around national, cultural, historical and heritage centric museums, emphasising on traditional and modern museums, have been selected to do this scoping review. The findings highlighted various evolving roles for museums, as well as different traditional and contemporary museology practices that pertain to inclusivity.

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1 Introduction

Museums today undertake a myriad of different roles, from being an institution of archiving past collections to educating the public about the past, its memories, to being a popular tourist attraction; each role has its own functionality and purpose, yet each role forms a cohesive ecosystem that intertwines. Over the years, as society progressed, museums stayed relevant, which meant constant evolution of their role in society and their practices in museology. Museums served as an educative institution as well as an archive for past collections; this would mean that museums are places where narratives of past collections are created and communicated to the mass [1, 2]. It is also important to understand that while museums act as a bridge for the mass to understand more about history, culture, heritage and the nation, these would make museums a ‘site of memory’ [3]. Considering the rapid evolution of museums and museology practices, it is important to address the ongoing evolution of museums and how that affects certain aspects: first, exploring how the constant and changing role of museums affects memory outcomes such as memory-making, memory-retention and collective memory; second, exploring how the changing role of museums theoretically changes or affects museology and curatorial practices; third, how the role of museums and museology/curatorial practices has affected the way narration is created and/or interpreted for the mass to consume; lastly, what visitor engagement strategies have museums put in place to deliver such narratives to the mass with the different practices in hand. This scoping review aims to answer several research questions:

RQ1: How has literature captured the evolving role of museums?

RQ2: How has the museum role affected memory outcomes, focusing on memory-making, memory-retention, and collective memory?

RQ3: In what ways have museums adapted their curatorial and museology practices in response to the evolving role of museums?

RQ4: In what ways have museums revisited and adapted their visitor engagement strategies to retain relevancy and trust as an authoritative medium towards historical, cultural, heritage, and national narratives, as well as an archive for past collections?

These questions led to the development of this scoping review to understand existing epistemology around museums and memory.

2 Methodology

2.1 *Research Design and Process*

This scoping review followed the PRISMA-ScR checklist and guideline to ensure that the review is conducted in a clear, scientific, and reproducible way. The eligibility criteria include publication dates between 01/01/2000 and 09/06/2025 (date of

Table 1 Keywords used for search

Keywords #1		Keywords #2		Keywords #3
Memory-making OR memory- retention OR collective memory	AND	Museum* OR cultural museum* OR heritage museum* OR histor* museum* OR national museum*	AND	Visitor engagement OR visitor experience* OR narrati* OR storytelling OR curat* OR exhibit* OR meaning making OR participat* OR practic*

search conducted), English-only papers, and that is relevant to museums focusing on museology practices, narration and/or visitor engagement strategies. A search was conducted through the databases SCOPUS and Web of Science (WoS) from 05/06/2025 to 09/06/2025. When searching through the databases of SCOPUS and Web of Science, a list of combined keywords was used (Table 1).

All searches were completed on 09/06/2025. A total of 1046 articles were found through SCOPUS (n = 663) and Web of Science (n = 383). EndNote 20 was used to streamline the screening procedure. Duplications were removed, excluding 893 articles, resulting in 193 articles. The second screening checked if the full text documents were available, which excluded 55 articles, leading to a total of 138 articles remaining. The third screening checked the eligibility of the article by reviewing the title, abstract, and discussion/findings section, which excluded 105 articles for various reasons (see Fig. 1). The total number of articles included for this scoping review was reduced to 33. Figure 1 shows the process.

3 Thematic Findings

3.1 Role of Museums

Museums today place importance on active participation and inclusivity of the public members [4]. The current role of museums has a myriad of definitions and ‘roles like being “facilitators, enablers and mediators of learning” [5], ‘sites of memory’ [3] and ‘memory institutions’ [6]. Museums curate stories, artefacts and voices, implying that museums are actively defining which or what identities and stories ‘count’ and which identities or stories are sidelined [7]. Collective identities created through ‘particular themes, heroes, or founding myths’ are subtly invited to visitors to see themselves as part of this ‘collective identity’, establishing a sense of ‘belongingness’ [7]. Museums also bear responsibilities of supporting processes like nation-building, developing a ‘social/collective consciousness’ [8] and cultivating certain understandings of historical events [1, 9] and cultural events [10]. Museums hold the power to curate and present narratives which ‘perform a special role in communicating and legitimising predominant social relations’ [11, 12]. There is a

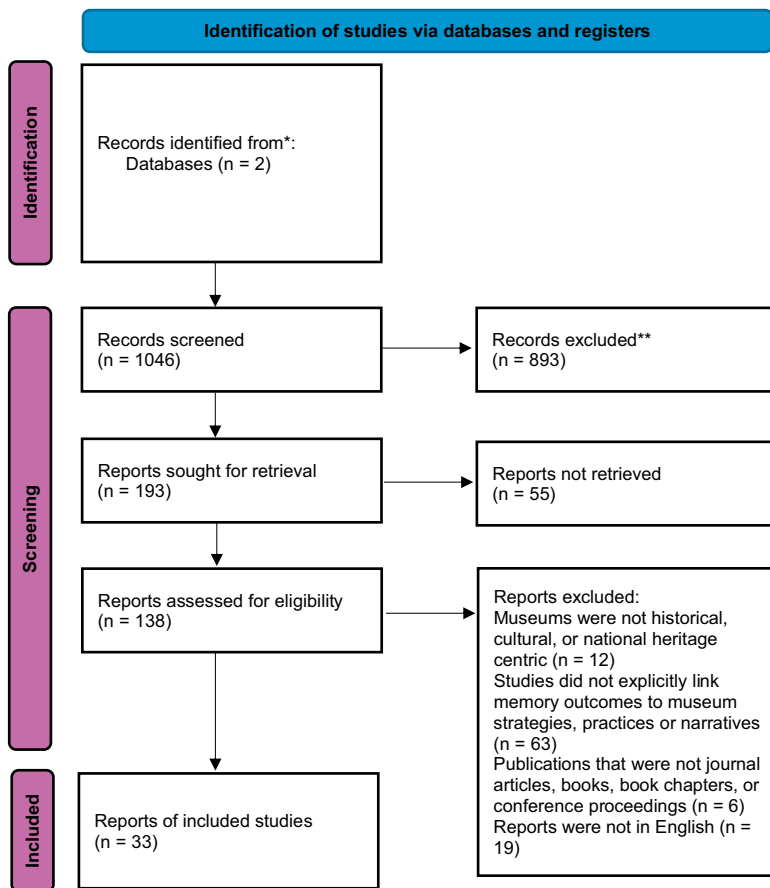


Fig. 1 PRISMA 2020 process diagram

clear ‘entanglement of power, knowledge, and memory’ within the national museum [13]. However, contemporary museology practices show that some ‘power’ is given back to the communities to broaden the sense of identity, ‘ownership of cultural heritage’ and defining individual/collective memory [14], Along with commercialisation in the tourism industry through corporations [15] and populist mobilisation efforts [16] acting as a political tool [17]. Museology practitioners keep pace to stay relevant [18] as museums continue to bear the role of archiving, advocacy [19] and education. Recognizing that museums are continually redefining their role means that memory-related consequences are constantly changing.

3.2 *Memory Outcomes (Memory-Making and Memory-Retention)*

It is important to discuss collective memory. Collective memory is subjective and lacks a concrete definition; scholars define it as ‘actively produced, shaped, maintained, and negotiated through memory practices and their affiliated artefacts’ [20]; ‘permanent process of active reconstitution and re-significance of a past’ [10]. Museum professionals (i.e. curators) help with ‘collective memory-building’ by recognising and legitimising heritage tourism to showcase national identity [6]. Museum professionals also help to curate and create, creating an ‘established professional norm’ ‘crystalising’ narratives making it unalterable [21]. Museum visitors are blind to the curation process, and instinctively visitors assume the information being presented is definitive [15]. Collective memory has gotten complex over the years [8], making it ‘become so intertwined, entangled and overwritten that is almost impossible to distinguish where one person’s, or team’s, or time’s imprint begins and another ends’ [9]. Museum outcomes through curatorial and visitor practices contribute to the construction of cultural and collective memory. Museums no longer act as passive archives but as sites where memory is constantly being produced, negotiated and mediated through narration and digital technologies [3, 10, 20]. However, existing literature highlights limited empirical evidence on memory-retention or reconstruct experiences in everyday situations pointing out a gap in current literature leading to a need to discuss museum practices.

3.3 *Museum Practices*

In the modern era, ‘museums are situating participation, inclusion and community-oriented projects at the core of their work’ [22], indicating involvement with communities becoming a ‘community hub’ and fostering a sense of collective community identities [4, 8]. Museums are places where they give ‘dying objects, traditions, places and ways of life a “second life” through preservation, conservation and exhibition’ [23, 24]. Museums also try to include narratives of ‘formerly marginalised or silent memory communities’, presenting a more diversified memory [12] through material culture [25, 26]. Some museums try to stay traditional and only use certain technologies for marketing and exhibiting their collection online [10, 21] to garner visitor perspective to build meaningful experiences and increase learning outcomes and meaning-making [5]. Certain practices contradict previous notions, for example, ‘museums make certain choices determined by judgements as to value, significance or monetary worth’ [11]. These practices and judgements reveals a ‘socio-political processes through the power relations involved’ [27] is evident posing issues like ‘hindered possibilities to intervene, revitalise, or reappropriate elements of that heritage to fuel in next contexts of usage, interpretation, and memory-making’ [26] and limiting narration through exclusion of information [17, 19, 28]. Traditionally, museum narratives were told in a

one-directional exchange where museums deliver historical, cultural and national narratives while visitors passively listen, creating a 'master narrative' [1]. However, with time, narrative practices have changed, allowing visitors to comprehensively understand how narration is experienced, self-valued and understood either individually or collectively [2, 29]. Overall, museum practices shifted from traditional modes of collection, archival and exclusion practices [11, 27] to participatory inclusivity [12, 22]. Most literature focuses on institutional intentions rather than visitor perspective, revealing a gap in understanding the impact of practices on visitors, making understanding museum visitor engagement strategies is vital.

3.4 Visitor Engagement Strategies

Visitor engagement strategies vary depending on the location and type of the museum and its missions [12, 17]. A common visitor engagement strategy would be museum tours [3, 6]; upon deeper analysis, museum tours often have a structural guideline on visiting specific artefacts [17, 25], forming certain narratives. Guided tours promote museums as sites of learning [4] and spaces for live communication, allowing the transmission of memory and experience interpersonally [30], and transform traditional museum spaces into a 'forum' [31]. The mediation of technology promotes learning of knowledge with 'general culture enrichment, pleasure, and enjoyment' [5], while transcending physical boundaries, facilitating remote communication [32], and as an explorative 'sandbox' to explore museology practices [10]. Visitor engagement strategies in museums are contextual and dependent on museum content and mission. Based on the scoping review, there is a mix of interaction zones [12], theatrical performances [3], artefact arrangements [33] and memorial spaces [4].

4 Discussion and Conclusion

This scoping review aimed to map out how the role of museums in memory-making and memory-retention interlinked with current museum practices, narratives and visitor engagement strategies. In the analysis, four core themes were identified. First, the role of museums as sites of memory [3], facilitators of memory [5], to institutions of archival to official institutions that automatically bared the responsibilities of nation building of historical, cultural and heritage related events. Second, the outcomes of visiting a museum changes accordingly to museology practices creating a sense of collective memory and/or identity [6, 20]. Third, the evolving museology practices where traditional museums portray narratives in a top-down approach [1, 11, 28], while contemporary museology practices try to bring inclusive towards communities [4, 8, 25, 26]. Lastly, museums visitor engagement strategies for resilience and to stay relevant were identified and discussed [3, 4, 12, 33]. The

databases SCOPUS and Web of Science were used to do the screening of eligible articles to explore this phenomenon, which resulted in 33 eligible articles. A thematic analysis revealed four core themes (role of museums, memory outcomes, museum practices and visitor engagement strategies). The analysis provided different roles that museums were bestowed with, as well as how these roles affected and evolved into different museology practices and how the narrations were created and delivered in museums. While museums remained an important institution in society and to local communities, there were also efforts from the museums' side to be more inclusive of local communities, encouraging 'collective community identities and memories'. The scoping review reveals certain gaps; the studies did not explicitly reveal how memory outcomes are conceptualised and how visitors were impacted. Further studies can incorporate studies published before 2000 to capture foundational concepts, while considering limiting the inclusion criteria to only empirical studies.

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