

*Advocates and Allies: The Impact of Activist Museums in the Struggle for  
Human Rights*

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## **Introduction**

Upon first view, museums and heritage sites might not seem to be the most obvious of allies in the struggle for human rights. The history of the museum is linked inextricably to colonialism, privilege and an elitism which led to the perpetuation of harmful narratives about the “other” and promoted the overarching societal messages of the time, usually to the benefit of the white ruling class.

A new trend began to emerge in museology in the 1970s and 80s; a trend I will examine in more detail shortly. Suffice it to say, museums began to embrace the challenge of discovering their social value and began to promote democracy, citizenship, and eventually civil and human rights within their galleries. As you look at the landscape of the heritage sector today, it is peppered with programmes, exhibitions, and entire institutions devoted to the promotion of a more just society. But is it making a difference?

The work I have undertaken for my PhD has been to try to answer this question. Now that some museums have become advocates for the cause of human rights, is our work making a positive impact on our visitors? During this brief presentation, I will outline my research which seeks to better understand the impact human rights museums and heritage sites have on their audiences.

## **Background**

I’d like to begin by tracking this trend I referred to earlier which dramatically shifted the field of museology from one focused almost exclusively on preservation, collections management, and research to one which has a more outward focus on social value, audiences, and the promotion of positive social outcomes.

In 1989, Peter Vergo published a book which called for a shift in focus for museum professionals and researchers.