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## **Rehabilitating unauthorised touch *or* Why museum visitors touch the exhibits**

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## **Rehabilitating unauthorised touch *or* Why museum visitors touch the exhibits**

In 2014 *Senses and Society* published a special issue on 'Sensory Museology'. Registering the emergence of this new multi-disciplinary field, the editor usefully observed that 'its most salient trend has been the rehabilitation of touch'. Arguably, however, touch has only been rehabilitated as an area of study insofar as it is authorised by the museum. Scholars have rarely considered the propensity of visitors to touch museum exhibits when they do not have permission to do so. In this article I suggest that the academic emphasis on authorised forms of contact privileges the institution's aims and perspective. Conversely, researching unauthorised touch places a higher degree of emphasis on the visitors' motivations and responses, and has the capacity to bring dominant characterisations of the museum into question. I substantiate and work through these claims by drawing on interview-based research conducted at the British Museum, and by investigating why visitors touch the exhibits without permission, what they touch, and what experiences that encounter enables.

Keywords: Sensory museology, touch, museums, exhibits, visitors, vandalism.

### **Rehabilitating unauthorised touch or Why museum visitors touch the exhibits**

I was sitting in the Egyptian sculpture gallery at the British Museum when I noticed a boy standing in front of a giant granite carving of a forearm and clenched fist.<sup>1</sup> Having taken stock of the sculpture, which originally formed part of a monumental portrait of Amenhotep III, the boy clenched his own fists, pulled his hands up into his body, and began to shadow box. He danced slightly on his feet as if anticipating a punch, jabbed out, backed off, came forwards again and hit straight, bringing his blow up short so that the force was lessened and his hand came to rest on that of the sculpture, knuckle against knuckle.

A few minutes later and at the other end of the gallery a man paused briefly next to a stone libation bowl. He tapped it with his fingernails, repeated the action, and walked on. Beyond him, a young woman was inspecting the sarcophagus of the God's Wife Ankhnesneferibre. Its lid had been lifted and propped onto wood blocks so that visitors could get a glimpse of the interior, and she leant in to look, placing her hands on the stone rim as she did so. She then stepped back slightly and ran her hands outwards along the thick edge, made a comment to her friend, and stooped to trace her fingertips along the lines of hieroglyphs that are incised on the surface of the vault, prodding them slightly.<sup>2</sup>

### **Authorised touch and its limits**

In 2014 the *Journal of Senses and Society* published a special issue on 'Sensory Museology'. Introducing the articles, the editor David Howes pointed to the emergence of new multi-disciplinary fields of sensory study, including that of sensory museology, and commented that "perhaps its most salient trend has been the rehabilitation of touch" (Howes, 2014a, p. 259). Here, I want to consider Howes' useful notion of the rehabilitation of touch and develop its scope beyond the possibilities of a brief introduction. I do so via the topic of museum visitors touching exhibits without express permission from the institution.

In his essay Howes draws on the work of various scholars, myself included, to provide a brief overview of the place of touch in museums. He observes that, until comparatively recently, scholars typically conceived of the museum as a place of pure spectatorship where visitors were warned to keep their hands off the exhibits. While this was generally true of nineteenth and twentieth century institutions, he explains, scholars have since presented a more nuanced picture of sensory experience in museums and have showed how visitors to seventeenth and eighteenth century museums were often allowed, and sometimes expected, to handle the exhibits. Contemporaneous philosophers, commentators on the arts, and diarists variously attested to the role of touch in learning about objects for aesthetic pleasure, in order to make a connection with the original users or makers, and occasionally for healing. In tracing these arguments, Howes notes that academics have demonstrated that the experience of studying objects or visiting museums was far more multi-sensory than is often recognised, and that it was only in the opening decades of the nineteenth century that touch began to be systematically restricted.

Continuing his discussion, Howes explains that tactile practices did not entirely disappear from museums. Connoisseurs continued to handle objects for the purposes of identification and authentication, and in the process of arranging displays, and in the early twentieth century, Science and children's museums began to provide visitors with hands-on activities. Even so, Howes writes, it was only towards the end of the century, that tactile opportunities were more thoroughly reintroduced and became an integral part of mainstream museum provision. Recapping the work of various authors, he notes that this development was part of a trend to make museums more accessible to blind and visually impaired visitors, and then latterly, to be more interactive and thus more engaging to visitors of all ages, experience, and background.

Howes sums up his introduction by writing that "in the museum of the twenty-first century, the senses are making a comeback" (Howes, 2014a, p. 264). He does not make the

point explicit, but his discussion implies that this comeback has three related aspects with regard to touch. It is rehabilitated in that it was a topic of learned discussion, largely fell from notice, and has since been reinstated as a valid line of enquiry. Second, it is rehabilitated in that accounts of touch have been inserted into the historical record, and thirdly, insofar as tactile activity has become a staple of conventional museum practice. Its reputation restored, the sense of touch has been reintroduced to museum visiting, and conversely, in being put back into use, scholars have reassessed its potential capacities and role within museum practice.

Yet despite the diversity and depth of museological enquiry on the subject of touch and the senses more generally, it is noticeable that these discussions, including my own, have largely concentrated on instances of authorised touch – on those occasions where museum staff or visitors are given permission to handle exhibits or other objects. Academics have commented on tactile practices in cabinets of curiosity, Enlightenment and Victorian museums, and in contemporary art galleries, and on how tactile practice has changed in museums over time (Bann, 2003) (Candlin, 2010) (Classen, 2007) (Classen, 2012) (Classen and Howes, 2006) (Findlen, 1994). Who touches and in what capacities has been a subject of debate and we have explored the use of touch by connoisseurs and within auction houses (Candlin, 2010) (Macdonald, 2007), and most of all within access provision. The merits of object handling sessions designed for hospital patients (Chatterjee, Vreeland, Sonjel and Noble, Guy, 2009) have been considered, as they have for people with dementia (Phillips, 2008), for visually impaired and blind audiences (Candlin, 2003)(Candlin, 2004) (Clintberg, 2014) (Coster and Loots, 2004) (Hetherington, 2000) (Hetherington, 2002), prisoners (Samuels, 2008), and refugees (Lynch, 2008). Scholars have also examined the capacity of touch to provide a starting point for cross-cultural exchange (Gadoua, 2014), or to prompt surprise, pleasure, emotion and memory (Dudley, 2014) (Golding, 2010) (Griffiths, 2008), as well as it being a means of learning (Griffiths, 2008). Touch has been considered in regard to

artefacts from museum collections, to art (Bourriaud, 2002) (Fisher, 1997) (Howes, 2014b), and replicas (Sportun, 2014), and in relation to direct contact and to haptic or digital technologies (Huhtamo, 2006) (Were, 2008) (Zimmer, Jefferies and Srinivasan, 2008) And yet, these discussions all consider examples of touch that happen with the permission of the institution.

When academics do consider unauthorised object touching they tend to examine extreme examples of contact wherein exhibits are defaced in protest against the museum, or the ideas and culture that the object is understood to stand for, or to draw attention to a particular cause (Gamboni, 2007). Low-key forms of touching such as those I describe in my opening paragraphs, where a museum visitor taps a bowl, or traces a hieroglyph or brings their hands to rest on an object, are rarely noticed, and if they are commented upon, are understood as a minor form of vandalism. For example, in her book *Museum Bodies*, Helen Rees-Leahy writes about a spectrum of damage that ranges from “petty acts of anti-social (or anti-museum) behaviour – *from the fingerprint of an illicit touch*, a piece of chewing gum stuck to an object, minor scratches, smudges and smears – to deliberate, and sometimes very dramatic acts of violence” (Leahy, 2013, p. 140 my emphasis). Similarly, professional publications such as *Museum Security and Protection* (Liston, 1993) and *The Handbook on Emergency Procedures* (Hekman, 2010), both published by the International Committee on Museums (ICOM) address low-key touching alongside examples of serious damage and under the rubric of vandalism.

With only a few exceptions, which I will detail below, touch is only rehabilitated insofar as it is authorised by the institution. Otherwise it is linked to damage. This is entirely understandable on the part of the museum because even relatively tentative interactions can be detrimental to the objects on display. Repeated touch can cover the surfaces of objects in dark handling grease or leave them shiny with wear. In some cases the artefact can be cleaned and the original patina restored, although porous materials can absorb

grease and it is not always possible to remove the dirt or repair its finish. Visitors may also inadvertently scratch objects, their nails, rings, and watches leaving scrapes across the surface or they may break more fragile objects. Cleaning objects is itself time consuming and expensive, necessitating expert care and attention. Given that they are charged with the conservation and preservation of the objects in their care, it is important that museums limit or prevent visitors from touching objects without permission.

It is less clear why academics have largely refrained from examining low-key examples of unauthorised touch or from questioning its pejorative characterisation, but the lack of attention may be linked to the various aspects of the rehabilitation project that Howes outlines. To bring a personal perspective to bear on the subject, I began researching tactile engagement in museums in 2004, at which point the topic was considered to be almost outlandish and certainly counter-intuitive – what could touch possibly have to do with exhibits or with museum visiting? In retrospect I think I side lined my initial research on unauthorised touch (which includes much of the empirical material presented in this article) and concentrated on institutionally acceptable interactions in order to legitimate my own endeavours. It is possible that the absence of wider discussion on unsanctioned sensory interaction may have similarly anxious underpinnings, and that writing about unauthorised sensory experience may be a marker of the growing acceptance of sensory museum studies to which Howes refers.

At the same time, the propensity to work on some topics and the reluctance to address others has a basis in wider institutional and cultural realities or aspirations, and my disinclination to write on unauthorised contact can be linked to the broader ideological project that underpinned the rehabilitation of touch for the arts and humanities. For many writers, addressing the capacities of touch was a means of countering ocularcentric conceptions of knowledge which assumed the possibility of a disembodied gaze and that, in turn, took white, male, heterosexual experience to be the norm (Csordas, 1994) (Haraway,



1988) (Haraway, 1990) (Irigaray, 1985). For the arts and humanities, investigating tactile experience variously provided a means of establishing an alternative, usually female, aesthetic and of theorising female sexuality (Lippard, 1990) (Phelan, 2007) (Classen, 2005), or of critically reappraising the subjugating gaze (Betterton, 1996) (Fisher, 2002). In the museum context, the reinstatement of touch had a strongly ethical dimension in that it is often taken to provide a means of ensuring both physical and intellectual access to people with disabilities or with different learning styles, and to improving the wellbeing of disadvantaged individuals and groups. Given this intellectual, ethical, and ideological context, it is unsurprising that most authors steered away from instances of damaging, irresponsible, or illicit touch, from objects blackened with handling grease, and from touch as an instance of possible vandalism. We wanted touch to work, so to speak.

And yet, as the few texts to consider the subject demonstrate, it is also important to rehabilitate examples of low-key unauthorised object touching in the sense of including them in scholarly debate. Firstly, investigating unauthorised touch can bring dominant perceptions of museums into question. While museums may present themselves as places for learning or contemplation, or more recently, for family outings and civilised social interaction, and while academics may variously characterise them as sites of ritual or discipline (Duncan, 1995) (Bennett, 2006) or as public forums and places of rational exchange (Cameron, 1971) (Barrett, 2011), there may be a mismatch between such (self) perceptions and the actuality of visiting. In their wonderfully titled book *No touching, no spitting, no praying: the museum in South Asia*, Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh observe that the India's subaltern masses were notoriously unwilling to follow the museum's cultural script and despite prohibitions continued to touch, spit and pray in its collections (Mathur and Singh, 2015). For them, this behaviour is indicative of some of the cultural differences in the evolution of museums in South Asia as opposed to Western Europe, and while they do

not discuss touch in any detail, it provides a means of rethinking or confronting the specificity of actual institutions and actual visitors.

Secondly, organised tactile activities tend to be rather circumscribed. The museum staff will have selected the objects to be touched, and in most cases will have chosen things that are neither valuable nor fragile. Given that handling tables are one of the most common forms of tactile provision, the objects also tend to be small and portable. The staff designate where the activity takes place and establish its aims. Of course, it is always possible for visitors to touch differently or to respond in unexpected ways, but the parameters of tactile engagement have already been set. Unauthorised touching does not entirely elude institutional reach, after all it occurs within that venue and in relation to its regulations, but it is much less pre-determined. Attending to unauthorised touch therefore widens the scope of enquiry, potentially encompasses sensory experiences that fall outside or exceed the institution's aims or intentions, and thereby attends to visitors' choices and agency.

Thirdly, examining unauthorised touch can inform our understanding of how visitors respond to objects and how the particular qualities of objects matter in this regard. In his essay 'Touching the Buddha' Christopher Wingfield examines the Sultanganj Buddha on display at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and argues that it has an unusually charismatic quality (Wingfield, 2010). Visitors will stop and pause in front of it and frequently reach out to touch, in a way that they do not with other exhibits. For him, its peculiar appeal and capacity to arrest attention is partly generated by the enchantment of technology whereby viewers are captivated by almost incomprehensible levels of skill (Gell, 1998), and is partly connected to its entirely tranquil expression, which is itself an aspect of expert making. Wingfield's essay opens up the possibility that unauthorised touch is differential, that some objects are touched more and differently to others, and, to some degree at least, that visitors are impelled to touch by the quality of the object. This dynamic

is far removed from that of vandalism and points to the complex relationships established between museum visitors and the objects on display.

While the study of authorised touch arguably privileges the institutional perspective, researching unauthorised touch brings that account into question, and places a high degree of emphasis on the visitors' motivations and responses. It also gives weight to the material, expressive, and cultural characteristics of specific objects, to what is touched, rather than just to the activity of touch. For the rest of this article then, I will turn to a specific environment and collection, that of the sculpture galleries at the British Museum, to ask why visitors touch, how do they touch, and what they touch.

The article draws on interview-based research that was conducted between 2004 and 2005. In the first instance I spoke with museum attendants and their supervisors.<sup>3</sup> These members of staff have extensive first hand experience of how visitors interact with objects in that they are charged with preventing visitors from touching the exhibits, and because visitor approach them to ask questions about the exhibits. In turn, I pursued the attendants' observations on unauthorised touch by interviewing visitors and considering the meanings that they gave to their actions.<sup>4</sup> While the attendants made observations about how visitors of various nationalities responded differently with respect to touch, a sustained cross-cultural analysis is outside the scope of this investigation and I only interviewed visitors who were resident in UK. Likewise, unless the interviewees spontaneously provided information about their backgrounds, I did not ask about faith, social class, education, or other matters. The purpose of this research was not to link patterns of touch to specific groups, rather to consider the range and character of tactile interaction within the galleries. Nor did I ask about other forms of sensory engagement. In recent years there has been a shift away from examining individual senses and towards analyses that recognise multi-sensory and cross-modal sensory experience (Howes, 2014b) (Lankauskas, 2006) (Spence, 2004) (Spence,

2010). If I was to do this research now, I would take a broader approach to the topic, as it is, I confined my enquiry to touch.

Given my interest in encounters with specific objects, I have kept my analysis focused on the British Museum, but it is important to recognise that this is not an isolated instance. Visitors behave similarly in other institutions where touch is forbidden, such as at Tate Britain where conservators reported that their exhibits are regularly touched. In addition, interview based research in other venues indicated that prohibition or permission seemed to make comparatively little difference to how visitors behaved. Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Wolverhampton Museum and Art Gallery both allow a certain degree of tactile interaction and the patterns of touch were comparable to those at the British Museum, as were the visitors' accounts of their tactile experiences.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Why touch? (What the attendants saw and the visitors said)**

Visitors to the British Museum are officially forbidden to touch but as one attendant commented "You stop a hundred people touching and there are two hundred more", adding that "it's like trying to turn back the sea". The museum attendants and their supervisors assessed this unsanctioned object touching in a variety of ways. One or two members of staff thought that visitors touched in full awareness of it being forbidden, and that it was done in deliberate defiance of the museums' regulation, but the majority of attendants disagreed and proffered other explanations for their behaviour.

For the attendants, signage and gallery design were major factors in why visitors touched the exhibits. While there were numerous signs instructing visitors not to touch, the attendants said that they were small, set at a low height, and were only written in English, so that the prohibition was unclear. Several attendants noted that the 'Please Touch' sign on the handling tables was regularly understood to apply to other exhibits in the same space.<sup>6</sup> They also observed that the lack of benches had an effect because when visitors were tired

they sat on plinths and rested against the sculptures, and that unauthorised touch was more prevalent in galleries that were crowded with objects or where exhibits were placed in the middle of the room, as is the case in the Egyptian sculpture gallery (Room 4) Staffing was cited as being an additional issue. Some attendants pointed out that only two members of staff were allocated to watch the Egyptian gallery, which is huge, whereas the Mexico gallery (Room 27), which also has a number of items on open display, is much smaller, making it easier to oversee the space, and in consequence there is far less illicit touching.

Most significantly, however, the attendants all agreed that visitors touched because they were unsure as to whether the exhibits were real or not. I expressed some surprise when this issue was first raised, whereupon they emphatically chorused their agreement, and later groups reiterated the point. They said that in a British context, the authenticity of museum exhibits was assumed but that this was not the case elsewhere, and museums in some countries, most notably China and Korea, put replicas on show. The lack of an entrance fee also confused visitors, and the warders reported “they can’t get their heads round it – it’s free, you can just walk in” and since visitors have to pay to enter museums in other countries, they presumed that the British Museum was a different kind of venue. According to the attendants some visitors thought that it was like “Madame Tussauds or a theme park”. Continuing their discussion, the attendants said that there was nothing to explain that the objects were real and that visitors’ assumption of inauthenticity was confirmed by the lack of cases. “People think [the exhibits] are replicas because they’re on show and are so easily accessible: they’re not behind glass, or anything, so they mustn’t be real”.

In some instances visitors thought that the exhibits were replicas and hence it was permissible to touch, in other instances visitors were unsure and touched objects to check their authenticity. Articulating the experience of the group, one attendant commented ‘some people don’t believe this is original, so they knock their fingers against stuff to see’. In

turn, the prevalence of unsanctioned touch reinforced the impression that the exhibits were not originals and another attendant reported that “I had an American couple come up to me and ask ‘Are they real? But everyone’s touching them’. Once people start touching, other people think it can’t be real”.

Despite their frustration at the amount of unsanctioned object touching, few of the attendants thought that it was motivated by a desire to damage the objects, or that it was a product of anti-social behaviour. On the contrary they thought that it was related to poor signage, gallery design, staffing levels, and above all, confusion as to whether the objects were original.

Interviews with visitors confirmed the points made by the attendants, not least that they assumed that they had licence to touch. This supposition was often connected to the prevalence of objects on open display. A man with two teenagers said that they went to museums regularly and commented that “we did get told not to touch a couple of times (in other venues), but I assume that in here it is OK”. In contrast, a couple had desisted from touching. The woman commented that ‘my degree in medieval history taught me not to touch’, but she similarly presumed that visitors had some licence when she added “I think it is great that things are so accessible in this gallery. If they don’t want people to touch them, they would have put them away”. Other visitors suspected or recognised that they were not supposed to touch and acknowledged the possibility of it causing damage, but stressed that they had been careful. On being asked whether she had touched anything one visitor replied, “Yes, all the really solid stuff, like the sarcophagus. It’s so solid, it’s made to last, I can’t imagine anything destroying it”.

Some visitors verified the attendants’ comments about touching the exhibits to check their authenticity. Feeling the temperature, texture, and solidity of stone helped assure them that the sculptures on exhibition were indeed real, but more generally, they were touched because they were keen to know more about the objects on display. They

were interested in the material properties of the objects, and particularly in qualities that cannot be easily assessed by looking alone. One visitor said that she had “wanted to feel the level of the engraving (on the God’s Wife sarcophagus), how deep they were engraved”, and then commented that “it was so clear, so finely defined”. Visitors also touched unfinished sections of stone to assess its texture, with one comparing the worked and unworked surfaces of a fragment of a stele from the reign of Ptolemy IX:

It feels very smooth; it’s amazing that they could get it that smooth. It (the stone) doesn’t look like that to start with.

These investigations enabled visitors to make further judgements, and speaking about the same exhibit, a couple said:

We touched it to see what it felt like; very smooth, to see how they worked it, how much effort it would have taken to gauge it out, if it had been smoothed and buffed. To build up a picture.

By comparing the weight, density, or irregularity of the stone with the smoothness or sharpness of finish, visitors could draw conclusions about the difficulty of production and hence the maker’s skills. Likewise, visitors put their hands into gaps or holes to assess their depth, knocked on (and listened to) objects to determine their hollowness or solidity, and touched sharp edges to assess the precision with which the stone had been cut.

Not all of the visitors’ tactual interactions involved empirical investigation. Several of the attendants thought that some visitors touched the exhibits for luck and one remarked that until the Rosetta Stone was put behind glass: “people would lean over and tap it ... the object’s been around for so long, they think they’re getting some luck or good fortune”. In these instances visitors were thought to be touching the exhibits in a manner akin to that of feeling relics or talismans. Yet unlike many of the observations made by the attendants their conclusions about luck were surmised rather than based on conversations, and some of the other staff members drew slightly different conclusions from the same repertoire of

gestures. They thought that such actions concerned the visitors' link to the past and their place in history. Commenting on the Rosetta Stone being touched, one attendant said that "adults understand what it is they're touching, they feel a connection. It's old, it's there, you read it, you're touching history", and another echoed the point saying that visitors touch "to say 'I was here'. They want to feel a connection. These things were here years before I was around and will be here for years again afterwards".

As the attendants' had suggested, one visitor whom I interviewed thought that touching a carving of Sekhmet might be lucky and remarked that "I stroked it, I put my hand on the ankh that she was holding, I think it's lucky, I don't know why". They more usually echoed the point that touching objects allowed them to feel or to make a link with the past. Placing their hands upon the sculptures they wondered "who else touched it, who were the people who chiselled it away?" and often they tried to physically and imaginatively inhabit the place of the original maker or user by emulating their roles and mimicking the actions of carving, dragging, genuflecting, or adopting other stances that they thought appropriate. In these cases visitors were touching the exhibits in an attempt to visualise the place and time they had come from.

On this (stele of Ptolemy IX) you can see the lettering really clearly, but actually it's hardly there at all. You touch it and 'God, it's hot here, it's hard work and all they've given me is a bag of rice'.

At other times, touch was used in an attempt to reconcile the enormous gulf between then and now:

This sarcophagus, the texture is amazing, really smooth, well finished. I don't think an IKEA product would be like that after 3000 years. That's been chiselled out by some guy, the hieroglyphs, that was a common man who made that. It's the human element, some guy sat and chiselled and you're just trying to make sense of that.



This interviewee was wrestling with a sense that the maker is close to him (a common man, who shares his humanity, who worked and lived with things) and utterly remote (3,000 years away, immensely skilful, and ignorant of IKEA). Here and in other interviews, visitors talked about touch as a way of trying to make historical distance comprehensible and in so doing to grasp their own place whether that is 'as a speck in history' or as part of ongoing, shared embodied experience.

Thus, the visitors therefore touched the objects on display to establish that were real and not replicas, to find out about the material qualities of an exhibit and the processes by which it was made, and to get a grasp on the skill involved in its manufacture. They also touched to make contact with the past. It is possible that a consciousness of being connected to past eras and peoples is what prompts visitors to touch, but judging from the interviews it seems that this experience is predicated on actual contact. Visitors needed to put their hands into the places that their predecessors touched, or to use their bodies to mimic the shapes of the initial makers and users in order to conceive of, or to bridge the enormous geographical and historical distances that lie between them and the objects' contexts of production.

Educators and curators at the British Museum want audiences to learn about the exhibits and to think historically and, apart from the fact that their actions are unauthorised, the visitors are in complete accord with those aims. At the same time, however, these instances of unauthorised touch present the museum in a slightly different aspect than is commonly the case. As Howes notes, touch has been rehabilitated within mainstream museum provision, but it is also important to point out that in practice, the use of touch is limited and is generally restricted to handling tables, maybe a touch tour, or to interactive stations of various kinds. If unauthorised touch is factored in, however, then it is clear that many museums are far more multisensory than is generally acknowledged. Museums with objects on open display are rich with tactile engagement. (Indeed I can't help wondering if

this were ever the case. It is not that museums were multi-sensory, became predominantly visual, and later regained some multisensory elements, but that object touching never went away – it just went underground, so to speak. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this article to pursue that question).

In addition, the prevalence of unauthorised touch brings the notion of the museum as prohibitive space into question. Clearly there are rules and codes of behaviour, but they do not always translate, are unclear, misunderstood, ignored, or are contravened. The gallery design, staff numbers, size of the galleries, density of objects, and sheer volume of visitors make it difficult to police the sculpture galleries, and to some extent the attendants are sympathetic to the visitors desire to touch the objects, understanding that they do so in a spirit of enquiry rather than out of any intent to damage. Indeed, the visitors are not behaving in a rogue manner, rather they deem the exhibits to be in need of verification, or interpret the infrastructure of the exhibition as giving licence to touch. Far from being a panopticon where all corners are kept under surveillance, or even an institution where rules against touching are clear and successfully imposed, the museum emerges as an intermittently or partially regulated space, that practices a certain degree of forbearance, and where visitors do interact with objects in ways that are not explicitly authorised or intentionally promoted by the institution.

### **How exhibits are touched (What visitors do)**

The staff at the British Museum ascribed various motivations for touching the exhibits, but they also noticed patterns of touch. Not everything was touched in the same way. They told me that visitors tapped or knocked objects made out of metal, scratched at exhibits with loose or flaky surfaces, and leant into and onto large sculptures. More strikingly, the attendants reported that representational carvings of animals received a particular kind of attention. Visitors patted the head of a colossal horse from the mausoleum at Halikarnassos,

caressed the forehead of the Athenian bull, rubbed the curved horns of an Egyptian carving of a ram and stroked the stone noses of various other animals. An attendant also reported that visitors patted the sculpture of the 'Dog of Alcibiades' and that "I've seen people trying to feed it sweets, putting things into its open mouth – they poke it – is it alive? They're like kids trying to see what something is or what it will do".

Sculptures of human or human-animal figures were treated differently. According to the attendants, visitors perched on statues of sitting figures, or placed their children into the sculptures' laps, particularly onto the knees of the large carvings of the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet (misguidedly so, given her title was 'She Who Mauls'). Stomachs attracted attention, and a life-size sculpture of Septimius Severus, the first African-born Roman emperor, had his muscular belly stroked, as did the far more rotund *Laughing Buddha*. The outstretched hand of a Roman statue of Venus was regularly held. Feet are touched. Other statues are treated in an explicitly sexualised manner. The gallery supervisors commented that Lely's Venus, a Roman statue of Aphrodite leaving her bath, was put behind barriers because so many "people kept patting her behind". The attendants reported similar sightings, and they also noted that visitors touched the breasts of statues of bare chested women, especially the sculptures of the Mother Goddess from Tamil Nadu in the Asia gallery, and the pair of female Sphinx in the Egyptian gallery. These latter statues had to be placed in vitrines for protection. Statues of men were touched on their genitals, and the attendants commented that *The Vaison Diadumenos*, a Roman sculpture of a victorious athlete on display in Room 23 had a blackened penis. "It's a giggle factor", they explained 'they stick their fingers in, and all their bits (i.e. breasts, buttocks, and genitals) are all scratched and broken off and poked".

For the visitors, touching the sculptures of animals and humans had a markedly different dynamic to that of touching architectural exhibits such as columns or sarcophagi. It did not provide a connection with the past, rather the representational character of the

sculptures outweighed the consideration of who made the carvings, when, and under what conditions. These sculptures were not primarily conceived as products of human endeavour, but as quasi-men, women, and animals. A woman who was visiting the museum with her teenage daughter said:

I touched the man's penis... just because no one else does. It's because you shouldn't, it's the same with the nipples, it's sexual, you're not supposed to. He's not terribly well endowed. I suppose it's bravado, especially a woman doing the touching.

Her bravado is not primarily concerned with touching a sculpture when she should refrain from doing so, but with contravening the social taboo of touching a man's genitals in public. Although she was touching a stone carving, the action has frisson because the carving is a representation of a man: the sculpture is both man / not man. Indeed, the visitor refers to the sculpture as being human – 'the man's penis', 'he's not well endowed'.

A similar logic applied to the way that visitors touched other figures, both clothed and unclothed, and animals. Visitors behaved in ways that were appropriate to the real-life version of that thing, for example, stroking a horse's nose, but precisely because it is a carving, they were free to push the boundaries of what is acceptable or safe. Adults would not generally touch the bottom or the breasts of someone other than a lover, or take the outstretched hand of a stranger. Equally, it would be unwise to pat the head of a bull, or dangle sweets over the mouth of a large slavering dog. These actions are variously playful, slightly shocking, or funny, because they exploit the tension between the stone representation and the 'real' thing it depicts. One of the attendants said that visitors "want to touch the horse (from Halikarnassos), they want to feed it sugar-lumps. If it did move they'd get a shock", which suggests that the pleasure of touching the animal sculptures may also lie in the imagined possibility that the stone dog might just bite back or the carved lion roar.

Visitors touch the exhibits in play. In touching, they are making visual jokes, performing for themselves and their companions (this being in the period before selfies, now such actions are made to camera). Or they are using the exhibits to create imaginative tableaux wherein where stone dogs might bite or the massive figure of Septimus Severus step from his plinth. Alternatively, their touch transforms the stone figure into a man or woman who is an object of desire. Visitors breathe life and movement into the objects, incorporating them into playful, imaginative, and erotic worlds where objects transmute from inanimate stone to animate flesh.

Even these few examples of unauthorised tactile behaviour indicate that the range of engagement is far greater than might be evident if the focus of study remained solely on organised handling activities or tours. Visitors do not only touch objects in order to learn about them or to connect with the past, but to make visual jokes (some of which are rather lewd), play, and imagine. These patterns of touch also demonstrate the visitors' agency. They find ways to learn that have not be pre-selected by the museum and that do not follow conventional scripts for visiting. They discover non-rational as well as rational pleasure in the gaps where regulation fails or is ignored, and they experience the objects in ways that fall outside or exceed the institution's explicit agenda: that are affective, erotic, silly, or humorous.

In turn, such gestures allow us to further reconsider some of the prevalent accounts of the museum. The museologist Andrea Witcomb has noted that a theoretical emphasis on discipline and regulation has obscured histories of the museum as a space of non-rational pleasure, and of its links with popular culture and entertainment (Witcomb, 2003). Here the visitors' experience is closely connected to the arts and to popular culture where the notion of objects stepping off their plinth is a staple motif. Films including *Harry Potter* and *The Mummy* feature animate carvings and the Ben Stiller series *Nights at the Museum* tells the story of exhibits that come to life. For visitors with tactile inclinations the exhibits are not

only historical artefacts, relics of past civilisations, or works of art, but connect to the worlds of fiction and film.

### **Which exhibits are touched? (The qualities of objects)**

Like Christopher Wingfield watching the crowds at Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery and realising that they regularly paused in front of the Sultanganj Buddha, the staff at the British Museum registered patterns of touch. They saw that different types of objects, such as carving of animals, were touched in particular ways, and they noticed that individual objects attracted more or less tactual attention. All the animal sculptures on open display were touched, as were those of humans, but some were touched more than others. One of the supervisors commented that:

The baboon is always a focus of attention. It's the positioning, it's in the middle of a walkway and then it's at just the right height. He's very attractive – you can walk up to him and put your arms round him.

In this instance, the carving attracted attention because of its position in the gallery: it could be seen from a distance, visitors could walk directly towards it, and it was set at a height that enabled adult visitors to take it in their arms. Importantly, though, the visitors' propensity to touch was not only connected to the context of display but concerned the specific qualities of the object to hand. As the supervisor commented, the sculpture was 'attractive'. It is about the size of a toddler or a large doll, is squatting with its hands on its knees so that its body forms a compact shape, and it has a calm expression, as befits the god Thoth whom the baboon stands for, one of his aspects being the god of equilibrium. Notably, it was displayed alongside the figure of a seated man that was of a similar size and sitting in a comparable position, but according to the attendants, the baboon carving was so regularly hugged that there were concerns about its condition and it was removed to a

vitrine, while the sculpture of a man was much less frequently touched, and did not have to be placed behind glass.

Attendants made similar assessments as to why the Townley greyhounds were the subject of so much tactual interaction, and one commented that “they’re just so cute”. It is not only that these carvings are of baboons or dogs, but that they are of calm baboons and lithe dogs, one of which affectionately grooms the other. Lely’s Venus, which was also frequently touched, is a sculpture of an alluring woman posed to draw attention to her curvaceous body, and she is touched because she is lusciously beautiful, as befits the goddess of love. The boy who boxed with the monumental sculpture (the incident that I described in the opening to this article) did so because the arm was muscular and flexed and the fist clenched. Despite it being a fragment of a larger carving, this section embodies force and strength. It is unlikely that he would have attempted to box with a sculpture of a feeble or limp arm. The boy’s final fist-bump is also, in street culture, taken to be a sign of respect. The boy was ‘respecting’ his boxing opponent and, implicitly the might of the sculpture.

In these instances the expressive character of the sculpture was a factor in the frequency with which it was touched and how it was touched. These qualities are linked to the materials from which the sculpture is made. The white marble used in Lely’s Venus echoes pale flesh and contributes to its seductive character, and the density of the granite from which the monumental arm is carved contributes to an impression of might and power. In other instances the materials and finish of the sculpture attracted attention in their own right, and visitors routinely touched the long lines of a stone lion’s tail and the curve of a carved snake. The museum staff commented that some objects were more pleasurable to touch than others and one observed that “the black granite in the Egyptian galleries is very tactile, the shapes as well, very fluid: The round sweep of the scarab. It’s the shapes along with the material”.

The visitors' tactual interactions were highly specific, and they did not reach out in the same way to any or every exhibit. As with other instances of unauthorised touch, these patterns of selection indicate the visitors' agency, but they also point to the object being an important component in the activity of touch. The subject of the sculpture, the quality of attractiveness, the facial and bodily expression, and the particularity of the materials were all important factors in why some objects were touched more than others. Indeed, some objects had such a strong attraction for visitors that they experienced it as a loss of volition. One woman declared:

There is a snake in the Aztec gallery. You *have* to rub it underneath. You want to rub it. You have no choice. There's no excuse, I'm a terrible person.

More generally, visitors made remarks along the lines of "not being able to help touching" a particular thing, or that "it is crying out to be touched". In the process of making excuses, they were crediting the exhibits with the ability to prompt or even demand touch. The impetus of touch was understood as coming from the object.

As I noted earlier, studies of touch in museums and galleries usually concentrate on the audience, the process of learning, or the statement of inclusion that it establishes. Others concentrate on the changing history of tactile encounter or its significance within the institution. With only a few notable exceptions, they do not consider the thing that is being touched (Dudley, 2012) (Wingfield, 2010), and yet studying patterns of unauthorised touch shows that the objects' qualities matter: these are arresting things that entice visitors to stop and to reach out.

Viewed thus, touch ceases to be something that is done by people to things, but is an activity that occurs in conjunction with specific artefacts. This encounter has several components, some of which are human, some non-human, and some are non-human but represent or echo human and non-human animals. The signage is a factor, its language and prominence, as is the lack of seating, the height or width of the plinths, and the presence or



absence of glass vitrines. The size of the room, density of the exhibition, and levels of staffing have an impact on the propensity of visitors to touch, as do the capacities or forbearance of the attendants, and the visitors motivations and interest in the objects. Importantly, though, the subject and expressiveness of the exhibits, the skill with which they are made and the materials used, contribute to the producing a situation in which someone reaches out. Touch is not just a gesture, a passing caress; it is part of a network of practices, emotions, and things.

### **Changing museums, Rehabilitating visitors**

If touch is to be rehabilitated within museology then it is important to examine unauthorised as well as authorised contact. These are often small gestures, passing actions that could easily be missed: a finger following a row of hieroglyphs or stroking broken surfaces, hands patting carved heads or cupped round sinuous curves, knuckles gently tapping stone. Yet as the conservators know, these actions cumulatively add up, not only to layers of handling grease or to patches of wear, but to a changed version of the museum. It's dirtier perhaps, there are lines of grease over the edges of the sarcophagi and the penis of the victorious athlete, and the disciplinary mechanisms are not quite as impressive as may have been previously assumed, but it also emerges as a more tolerant place than may have been expected, wherein the attendants understand why visitors may want to touch and tacitly permit them to do so. Curiously, perhaps, the museum also becomes much more unstable. It is not clear whether the objects are real or replicas, or if the collection is comparable to the exhibitions found at Madame Tussauds or a theme park. These same objects have the capacity to lure and entice: they are not passive in this scenario.

Examining the accretions of unsanctioned contact also changes our conception of the objects. They are not passive recipients of touch, but invite a tap or caress or hug. Their qualities and characteristics prompt particular forms of action. Investigating unauthorised

touch also leads to a reassessment of museum visitors. It is easy to dismiss low key touching as an example of minor vandalism, of ignorance. Yet on closer consideration it is clear that unauthorised tactile engagements are not necessarily a product of unruliness. Far from being vandals, visitors with tactile inclinations are eager to learn and want feel connected to the peoples and places of the past. They encounter the exhibits through the lens of myth and movies, they joke, play, take imaginative leaps, and are so captivated by the sculptures that they box with carved arms or stroke stone snakes. Thus, examining unauthorised tactile behaviour is also a means of rehabilitating the reputation of those visitors who touch the exhibits without permission.

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<sup>2</sup> Constance Classen's book *Museum of the Senses* opens with a description of the visitors touching the sculptures in the British Museum Egyptian gallery. It is notable that our observations chime with respect to unsanctioned touch, even with respect to which objects are touched. Unfortunately, I read the manuscript shortly after my paper had been accepted for publication and so am unable to engage with her text in any substantive way. (Classen, Constance, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The gallery attendants were divided into three working parties and they meet each week. I was given permission to interview them at the weekly briefing sessions of the 24, 26 and 29 October 2004. In some cases I pursued the conversation with individual members of staff. I also met with the gallery supervisors on 29 October 2004.

<sup>4</sup> The visitor interviews were conducted on 10, 12, 14, 26 March 2005 and were held in the Egyptian sculpture gallery (Room 4), because according to the attendants, unsanctioned touching was most frequent in this room. With the assistance of Colin Marx, I conducted twenty interviews, some with single visitors, some with couples or groups. Some visitors had touched the exhibits and others had not.

<sup>5</sup> I carried out interview based research with the Tate Conservation team in August 2005, and with staff and visitors at Wolverhampton Museum and Art Gallery (in April 2005), and Yorkshire Sculpture Park (between October 2004 and April 2005). This research is unpublished.

<sup>6</sup> This point was echoed by Derek Pullen, Head of Stone Conservation at Tate Britain. He noted that the Carl Andre floor piece is meant to be walked over, but that some visitors 'take this as the status quo and go on to touch everything round it. We need

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to be careful about what surrounds it because there will always be (an extended) touching zone'. Interview: 7 August 2005.