

# **What is Heritage?**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘heritage’ as ‘property that is or may be inherited; an inheritance’, ‘valued things such as historic buildings that have been passed down from previous generations’, and ‘relating to things of historic or cultural value that are worthy of preservation’. The emphasis on inheritance and conservation is important here, as is the focus on ‘property’, ‘things’ or ‘buildings’. So (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, anyway), heritage is something that can be passed from one generation to the next, something that can be conserved or inherited, and something that has historic or cultural value. Heritage might be understood to be a physical ‘object’: a piece of property, a building or a place that is able to be ‘owned’ and passed on’ to someone else.

In addition to these physical *objects and places of heritage* there are also various *practices of heritage* that are conserved or handed down from one generation to the next. Language is an important aspect of who we understand ourselves to be, and it is learned and passed from adult to child, from generation to generation. These invisible or ‘intangible’ practices of heritage, such as language, culture, popular song, literature or dress, are as important in helping us to understand who we are as the physical objects and buildings that we are more used to thinking of as ‘heritage’. Another aspect of these practices of heritage is the ways in which we go about conserving things the choices we make about what to conserve from the past and what to discard: which memories to keep, and which to forget; which memorials to maintain, and which to allow to be demolished; which buildings to save, and which ones to allow to be built over. Practices of heritage are customs and habits which, although intangible, inform who we are as collectives, and help to create our collective social memory. We use objects of heritage (artefacts, buildings, sites, landscapes) alongside practices of heritage (languages, music, community commemorations, conservation and preservation of objects or memories from the past) to shape our ideas about our past, present and future. Another way of thinking about this distinction between objects of heritage and practices of heritage is to consider the different perspectives through which heritage is perceived. For every object of heritage there are also heritage practices. However one group of people (say, professional heritage managers) respond to heritage, other people may respond differently. Thus, around an object of heritage, there may be value judgments based on ‘inherent’

qualities (which may indeed play a determining role in designating the object and conserving it), but there may well be other values which drive the use of the object (associations of personal or national identity, associations with history, leisure etc., as in the example of designation of Harry S. Truman's otherwise humble dwelling as a National Historic Site discussed later in this course). For every object of tangible heritage there is also an intangible heritage that 'wraps' around it – the language we use to describe it, for example, or its place in social practice or religion. Objects of heritage are embedded in an experience created by various kinds of users and the people who attempt to manage this experience. An analogous situation exists in the art world in understanding aesthetics. There is no art without the spectator, and what the spectator (and critic) makes of the art work sits alongside what the artist intended and what official culture designates in a discursive and often contested relationship. So in addition to the objects and practices of heritage themselves, we also need to be mindful of varying 'perspectives', or *subject positions on heritage*.

The historian and geographer David Lowenthal has written extensively on the important distinction between heritage and history. For many people, the word 'heritage' is probably synonymous with 'history'. However, historians have criticized the many instances of recreation of the past in the image of the present which occur in museums, historic houses and heritage sites throughout the world, and have sought to distance themselves from what they might characterize as 'bad' history. As Lowenthal points out in *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, heritage is not history at all: 'it is not an inquiry into the past, but a celebration of it ... a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes' (Lowenthal, 1997, p. x). Heritage must be seen as separate from the pursuit of history, as it is concerned with the re-packaging of the past for some purpose in the present. These purposes may be nationalistic ones, or operate at the local level.

'Heritage' also has a series of specific and clearly defined technical and legal meanings. For example, the two places discussed earlier in this course are delineated as 'heritage' by their inclusion on the World Heritage List. As John Carman (2002, p. 22) notes, heritage is *created* in a process of *categorizing*. These places have an official position that has a series of obligations, both legal and 'moral', arising from their inclusion on this register. As places on the World Heritage List they must be actively conserved, they should have formal documents and policies in

place to determine their management, and there is an assumption that they will be able to be visited so that their values to conservation and the world's heritage can be appreciated. There are many other forms of official categorization that can be applied to heritage sites at the national or state level throughout the world. Indeed, heritage as a field of practice seems to be full of lists. The impulse within heritage to categorize is an important aspect of its character. The moment a place receives official recognition as a heritage 'site', its relationship with the landscape in which it exists and with the people who use it immediately changes. It somehow becomes a place, object or practice 'outside' the everyday. It is special, and set apart from the realm of daily life. Even where places are not officially recognized as heritage, the way in which they are set apart and used in the production of collective memory serves to define them as heritage. For example, although it might not belong on any heritage register, a local sports arena might be the focus for collective understandings of a local community and its past, and a materialisation of local memories, hopes and dreams. At the same time, the process of listing a site as heritage involves a series of value judgments about what is important, and hence worth conserving, and what is not. There is a dialectical relationship between the effect of listing something as heritage, and its perceived significance and importance to society.

Some authors would define heritage (or at least 'official' heritage) as those objects, places and practices that can be formally protected using heritage laws and charters. The kinds of heritage we are most accustomed to thinking about in this category are particular kinds of objects, buildings, towns and landscapes. One common way of classifying heritage is to distinguish between 'cultural' heritage (those things manufactured by humans), and 'natural' heritage (those which have not been manufactured by humans). While this seems like a fairly clear-cut distinction, it immediately throws up a series of problems in distinguishing the 'social' values of the natural world. Returning to the example of the Great Barrier Reef discussed earlier in this course, for the Indigenous Australians whose traditional country encompasses the reef and islands, the natural world is created and maintained by 'cultural' activities and ceremonies involving some aspects of intangible action such as song and dance, and other more practical activities such as controlled burning of the landscape and sustainable hunting and fishing practices. It would obviously be extremely difficult to characterise these values of the natural landscapes to Indigenous Australians using a system that divides 'cultural' and 'natural' heritage and sees the values of natural landscapes as being primarily ecological.

Heritage is in fact a very difficult concept to define. Most people will have an idea of what heritage 'is', and what kinds of thing could be described using the term heritage. Most people, too, would recognize the existence of an official heritage that could be opposed to their own personal or collective one. For example, many would have visited a national museum in the country in which they live but would recognize that the artifacts' contained within it do not describe entirely what they would understand as their own history and heritage. Clearly, any attempt to create an official heritage is necessarily both partial and selective. This gap between, on one hand, what an individual understands to be their heritage and, on the other hand, the official heritage promoted and managed by the state introduces the possibility of multiple 'heritages'. It has been suggested earlier that heritage could be understood to encompass objects, places and practices that have some significance in the present which relates to the past. In 2002 during the United Nations year for cultural heritage, UNESCO produced a list of 'types' of cultural heritage (UNESCO). This is one way of dividing and categorizing the many types of object, place and practice to which people attribute heritage value. It should not be considered an exhaustive list, but it gives a sense of the diversity of 'things' that might be considered to be official heritage:

- **Cultural Heritage Sites (including archaeological sites, ruins, historic buildings)**
- **Historic Cities (urban landscapes and their constituent parts as well as ruined cities)**
- **Cultural Landscapes (including parks, gardens and other 'modified' landscapes such as pastoral lands and farms)**
- **Natural Sacred Sites (places that people revere or hold important but that have no evidence of human modification, for example sacred mountains)**
- **Underwater Cultural Heritage (for example shipwrecks)**
- **Museums (including cultural museums, art galleries and house museums)**
- **movable cultural heritage (objects as diverse as paintings, tractors, stone tools and cameras this category covers any form of object that is movable and that is outside of an archaeological context)**
- **Handicrafts**

- **Documentary and digital heritage (the archives and objects deposited in libraries, including digital archives)**
- **Cinematographic heritage (movies and the ideas they convey)**
- **Oral Traditions (stories, histories and traditions that are not written but passed from generation to generation)**
- **Languages**
- **Festive events (festivals and carnivals and the traditions they embody)**
- **Rites and beliefs (rituals, traditions and religious beliefs)**
- **Music and song**
- **Performing Arts (theatre, drama, dance and music)**
- **Traditional Medicine**
- **Literature**
- **Culinary Traditions**
- **Traditional sports and games.**

Some of the types of heritage are objects and places ('physical' or 'material' heritage) while others are practices ('intangible' heritage). However, many of these categories cross both types of heritage. For example, ritual practices might involve incantations (intangible) as well as ritual objects (physical). So we should be careful of thinking of these categories as clear cut or distinct. In addition, this list only includes 'cultural' heritage. Natural heritage is most often thought about in terms of landscapes and ecological systems, but it is comprised of features such as plants, animals, natural landscapes and landforms, oceans and water bodies. Natural heritage is valued for its aesthetic qualities, its contribution to ecological, biological and geological processes and its provision of natural habitats for the conservation of biodiversity. In the same way that we perceive both tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage, we could also speak of the tangible aspects of natural heritage (the plants, animals and landforms) alongside the intangible (its aesthetic qualities and its contribution to biodiversity).

Another aspect of heritage is the idea that things tend to be classified as 'heritage' only in the

light of some risk of losing them. The element of potential or real threat to heritage – of destruction, loss or decay links heritage historically and politically with the conservation movement. Even where a building or object is under no immediate threat of destruction, its listing on a heritage register is an action which assumes a potential threat at some time in the future, from which it is being protected by legislation or listing. The connection between heritage and threat will become more important in the later part of this course.

Heritage is a term that is also quite often used to describe a set of values, or principles, which relate to the past. So, for example, it is possible for a firm of estate agents to use the term in its name not only to mean that it markets and sells ‘heritage’ properties, but also simultaneously to invoke a series of meanings about traditional values which are seen as desirable in buying and selling properties. We can also think here about the values which are implicit in making decisions about what to conserve and what not to conserve, in the choices we make about what we decide to label ‘heritage’ and what view as simply ‘old’ or ‘outdated’. These values are implicit in cultural heritage management.

- **Is heritage about the past or the present?**
- **How does heritage form the basis for our sense of collective identity?**
- **Can heritage transcend local meaning to acquire universal value?**
- **How do societies use heritage to remember (and forget) the events of the past?**
- **How do authority and power play out through heritage?**
- **How is the performance of heritage a form of social action?**
- **How do heritage decisions affect people’s lives?**
- **And how might heritage choices bring local people into conflict with the state?**

**Cultural Heritage** is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that is inherited from past generations. Not all legacies of past generations are

“Heritage”, rather heritage is a product of selection by society. Cultural heritage includes tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art, and artifacts), intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge), and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity).

The deliberate act of keeping cultural and heritage from the present for the future is known as preservation (American English) or conservation (British English), which cultural and historical ethnic museums and cultural centers promote, though these terms may have more specific or technical meaning in the same contexts in the other dialect. Preserved heritage has become an anchor of the global tourism industry, a major contributor economic value to local communities. Legal protection of cultural property comprises a number of international agreements and national laws, and these must also be implemented. There is intensive cooperation between the United Nations, UNESCO and Blue Shield International on the protection of cultural goods. This also applies to the integration of United Nations peacekeeping Objects are a part of the study of human history because they provide a concrete basis for ideas, and can validate them. Their preservation demonstrates a recognition of the necessity of the past and of the things that tell its story. In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal observes that preserved objects also validate memories. While digital acquisition techniques can provide a technological solution that is able to acquire the shape and the appearance of artifacts with an unprecedented precision in human history, the actuality of the object, as opposed to a reproduction, draws people in and gives them a literal way of touching the past. This unfortunately poses a danger as places and things are damaged by the hands of tourists, the light required to display them, and other risks of making an object known and available. The reality of this risk reinforces the fact that all artifacts are in a constant state of chemical transformation, so that what is considered to be preserved is actually changing – it is never as it once was. Similarly changing is the value each generation may place on the past and on the artifacts that link it to the past. Kautilya Society in Varanasi- When heritage protection becomes a fight for legality and participation "They harass me because I demand civil society participation to public policies and I contrast the misuse of privileges". Classical civilizations, and especially the Indian, have attributed supreme importance to the preservation of tradition. Its central idea was that social institutions, scientific knowledge and technological applications need to use a "heritage" as a "resource". Using contemporary language, we could say that ancient Indians considered, as social

resources, both economic assets (like natural resources and their exploitation structure) and factors promoting social integration (like institutions for the preservation of knowledge and for the maintenance of civil order). Ethics considered that what had been inherited should not be consumed, but should be handed over, possibly enriched, to successive generations. This was a moral imperative for all, except in the final life stage of sannyasa. What one generation considers "cultural heritage" may be rejected by the next generation, only to be revived by a subsequent generation.

### **Cultural property**

Cultural property includes the physical or "tangible" cultural heritage, such as artworks. These are generally split into two groups of movable and immovable heritage. Immovable heritage includes building so (which themselves may include installed art such as organs, stained glass windows, and frescos), large industrial installations, residential projects or other historic places and monuments. Moveable heritage includes books, documents, moveable artworks, machines, clothing, and other artifacts, that are considered worthy of preservation for the future. These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specified culture. Aspects and disciplines of the preservation and conservation of tangible culture include:

- Museology
- Archival science
- Conservation (cultural heritage)
  - Art conservation
  - Archaeological conservation
  - Architectural conservation
  - Film preservation
  - Phonograph record preservation
- Digital preservation

### **Intangible Culture**

"Intangible cultural heritage" consists of non-physical aspects of a particular culture, more often maintained by social customs during a specific period in history. The concept includes the ways



and means of behavior in a society, and the often formal rules for operating in a particular cultural climate. These include social values and traditions, customs and practices, aesthetic and spiritual beliefs, artistic expression, language and other aspects of human activity. The significance of physical artifacts can be interpreted as an act against the backdrop of socioeconomic, political, ethnic, religious and philosophical values of a particular group of people. Naturally, intangible cultural heritage is more difficult to preserve than physical objects. Aspects of the preservation and conservation of cultural intangibles include: Folklore, Oral history & Language preservation

**Natural heritage:** "Natural heritage" is also an important part of a society's heritage, encompassing the countryside and natural environment, including flora and fauna, scientifically known as biodiversity, as well as geological elements (including mineralogical, geomorphological, paleontological, etc.), scientifically known as geodiversity. These kind of heritage sites often serve as an important component in a country's tourist industry, attracting many visitors from abroad as well as locally. Heritage can also include cultural landscapes (natural features that may have cultural attributes). Aspects of the preservation and conservation of natural heritage include:

Significant was the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage that was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972. As of 2011, there are 936 World Heritage Sites: 725 Cultural, 183 Natural, and 28 mixed properties, in 153 countries. Each of these sites is considered important to the international community. The underwater cultural heritage is protected by the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. This convention is a legal instrument helping states parties to improve the protection of their underwater cultural heritage. In addition, UNESCO has begun designating masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights sitting as part of the United Nations Economic and Social Council with article 15 of its Covenant had sought to instill the principles under which cultural heritage is protected as part of a basic human right.