From Mouseion to Global Museums: A Historical Analysis of Museums as Epistemic Institutions

BITARA
Volume 9, Issue 2, 2026: 187-203
© The Author(s) 2026
e-ISSN: 2600-9080
http://www.bitarajournal.com
Received: 20 April 2026
Accepted: 21 May 2026
Published: 22 June 2026

Halim @ Ab Halim Ismail, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Ariyanti Mustapha & Rushdi Ramli[1]

1 Department of Fiqh-Usul and Applied Sciences, Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya 50603 Kuala Lumpur MALAYSIA.
E-mail: s2003866@siswa.um.edu.my; faqir_ila_rabbih@um.edu.my; ariyanti@um.edu.my; sufism@um.edu.my

*Corresponding Author: ariyanti@um.edu.my

Abstract

This article examines the historical development of museums as epistemic institutions through a chronological and analytical framework encompassing six major periods: the classical, Renaissance, Enlightenment, colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary eras. Employing a qualitative literature-based approach, the study analyses transformations in museum functions, structures, and underlying epistemological foundations. The findings reveal that museums have undergone significant transformations from text-based scholarly institutions to object-cantered systems, later evolving into instruments of power during the colonial period, and ultimately emerging as global epistemic institutions in the contemporary era. These shifts reflect broader changes in human knowledge systems and the relationship between knowledge, power, and representation. The study argues that museums are not merely repositories of artefacts but active agents in the production and structuring of knowledge and historical consciousness. While contemporary museums have become more inclusive and reflexive, their epistemological foundations remain largely rooted in Enlightenment-based Western traditions. The primary contribution of this article lies in its integrative framework, which connects museum history with epistemological transformation and power–knowledge theory. In addition, the study introduces a holistic interpretive perspective that highlights the potential for rethinking museum practices beyond dominant epistemological paradigms.

Keywords; museum history; museology; epistemology; heritage studies; colonialism; power and knowledge; epistemic institutions

This is an open-access article under the CC–BY 4.0 license

Cite This Article:
Halim @ Ab Halim Ismail, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Ariyanti Mustapha & Rushdi Ramli. (2026). From Mouseion to Global Museums: A Historical Analysis of Museums as Epistemic Institutions. *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 9(2): 187-203.

INTRODUCTION

Museums have emerged as one of the most influential cultural institutions in shaping public understanding of history, heritage, and identity. Beyond their conventional role as repositories of artefacts, museums function as active sites of knowledge production, where meanings are constructed, negotiated, and disseminated (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

In the context of globalization, museums serve as mediating spaces that connect past and present through the systematic organization and interpretation of material culture. The

narratives presented within museum environments do not merely convey information but actively shape perceptions of civilization, progress, and collective identity (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2015; Harrison, 2013).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes museums as epistemic institutions entities that not only preserve knowledge but also determine its structure, legitimacy, and meaning (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Smith, 2006). Within this framework, processes such as collection, classification, and exhibition function as mechanisms through which knowledge is constructed and authorized.

Despite the growing body of literature, existing studies tend to focus either on institutional history or on critical analyses of representation, often without fully integrating these dimensions into a comprehensive epistemological framework (Macdonald, 2006; Vergo, 1989). As a result, museums are frequently examined in fragmented ways that overlook the deeper connections between historical development, knowledge systems, and power structures.

Historically, museums emerged within Western intellectual traditions and evolved through several major phases. The classical *mouseion* functioned primarily as a scholarly institution grounded in textual knowledge (Casson, 2001; Bagnall, 2002). This was followed by the Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, which marked a shift toward object-based knowledge and curiosity-driven collection (Findlen, 1994; Daston & Park, 1998).

The Enlightenment period introduced systematic classification and public access, transforming museums into structured institutions of knowledge (Bennett, 1995; Foucault, 1970). During the colonial era, museums became instruments of power that shaped global narratives through the representation of colonized cultures (Coombes, 1994; Hicks, 2020).

Subsequent developments in the postcolonial and contemporary periods reflect growing awareness of these dynamics, with increasing emphasis on inclusivity, reflexivity, and social engagement (Macdonald, 2013; Janes & Sandell, 2019). However, Western epistemological foundations continue to exert significant influence over museum structures and practices (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

Considering these developments, this article aims to analyse the historical evolution of museums through a chronological and epistemological lens, with particular attention to shifts in function, structure, and underlying knowledge systems. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of museums as dynamic institutions that actively shape knowledge, historical consciousness, and cultural interpretation.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the historical development of museums reveals that these institutions have evolved through a dynamic and layered process, in which each historical phase reflects significant transformations in function, structure, and epistemological foundations. These transformations are not isolated, but interconnected, collectively shaping museums as epistemic institutions that actively construct knowledge and historical narratives.

The Classical Era: Text-Based Knowledge and Scholarly Epistemology

In the classical period, institutions such as the *mouseion* in Alexandria functioned not as exhibition spaces but as scholarly centres dedicated to the production, preservation, and transmission of knowledge. Unlike modern museums, which emphasize the visual display of artefacts, the *mouseion* was fundamentally an intellectual community structured around textual scholarship and philosophical inquiry (Casson, 2001; Bagnall, 2002).

At the core of this institution was the Library of Alexandria, which housed an extensive collection of manuscripts encompassing philosophy, science, medicine, mathematics, and literature. Works attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates formed part of this corpus, alongside texts from Egyptian, Persian, and other Near Eastern traditions, illustrating the breadth of intellectual exchange within the ancient world (Casson, 2001). These collections demonstrate that knowledge in this period was conceptualized primarily as a textual and interpretive enterprise rather than an empirical engagement with material objects (Bagnall, 2002).

In addition to manuscripts, the *mouseion* also facilitated scientific inquiry using instruments and observational practices. Scholars such as Eratosthenes employed astronomical tools to calculate the circumference of the Earth, while physicians like Herophilus and Erasistratus conducted anatomical studies that required the examination of human and animal bodies (Lloyd, 1973; von Staden, 1989). However, these material elements were not displayed for representational purposes; rather, they functioned as instruments supporting intellectual investigation (Casson, 2001).

This distinction is crucial in understanding the epistemological foundations of early museum-like institutions. Objects were not treated as carriers of meaning in themselves but as auxiliary tools within a broader framework of textual interpretation. Authority resided in scholarly discourse rather than in the materiality of objects (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

Furthermore, access to knowledge within the *mouseion* was highly restricted, confined to a select group of scholars operating within an elite intellectual environment. This exclusivity contrasts sharply with the later development of public museums, where knowledge dissemination became a central function (Bennett, 1995). From an analytical perspective, the classical era represents a text-based epistemology in which knowledge is constructed through interpretation, dialogue, and scholarly tradition. The absence of object-cantered display indicates that the association between museums and material artefacts is not inherent but historically contingent (Pomian, 1990). This period therefore establishes an important conceptual foundation: that institutions analogous to museums can exist without relying on object exhibition, emphasizing instead their primary role as epistemic systems.

The Renaissance: Object-Based Knowledge and the Emergence of Wunderkammer

The Renaissance period marked a significant epistemological transition in the development of museum-like institutions, characterized by the emergence of *Wunderkammer* (cabinets of curiosities). Unlike the text-cantered intellectual tradition of the classical *mouseion*, these collections signified a growing emphasis on material objects as primary sources of knowledge and inquiry (Findlen, 1994; Daston & Park, 1998). *Wunderkammer* were typically assembled

by scholars, aristocrats, and rulers who sought to collect and display objects that reflected the diversity and complexity of the natural and human world. These collections included natural specimens such as fossils, minerals, shells, and preserved animals, alongside artefacts such as ethnographic objects, scientific instruments, and rare manufactured items (Findlen, 1994). The coexistence of natural and artificial objects within the same space reflects an epistemological framework in which knowledge was not yet fully differentiated into disciplinary categories (Daston & Park, 1998).

One of the most well-documented examples is the collection of Ferrante Imperato in Naples, illustrated in his work *Dell'Historia Naturale* (1599). This cabinet contained a dense arrangement of specimens, including marine shells, taxidermized animals, minerals, and botanical samples, all displayed in a visually immersive environment. The arrangement emphasized abundance and variety rather than systematic classification, reflecting a mode of knowledge grounded in curiosity and visual engagement (Findlen, 1994).

Similarly, the *Museum Wormianum* established by Ole Worm in Copenhagen in the early seventeenth century included a wide range of objects such as animal skeletons, ethnographic artefacts, and scientific instruments. Notably, some objects, such as the so-called *unicorn horn* were later identified as narwhal tusks, illustrating the coexistence of empirical observation and speculative interpretation during this period (Daston & Park, 1998).

The imperial collections of Rudolf II in Prague further demonstrate the intersection between knowledge, power, and representation in Renaissance collecting practices. His *Kunstkammer* included paintings, mechanical devices, alchemical instruments, gemstones, and exotic artefacts acquired through global trade networks. These collections functioned not only as intellectual resources but also as symbols of political authority and cultural prestige (Evans, 1973; Findlen, 1994).

From an epistemological perspective, the Renaissance period represents a transitional phase between symbolic and empirical systems of knowledge. Objects began to acquire epistemic significance as sources of information about the natural world, yet their interpretation remained influenced by aesthetic, cultural, and even mythical frameworks (Daston & Park, 1998).

In this context, objects served dual roles. First, they functioned as empirical evidence that allowed observers to engage directly with the material world. Second, they operated as symbolic entities that conveyed meanings related to wonder, rarity, and the boundaries of human knowledge. This duality reflects an epistemology that had not yet fully embraced scientific rationalism but was moving toward it (Pomian, 1990).

Furthermore, access to *Wunderkammer* collections was typically restricted to elite circles, reinforcing the relationship between knowledge and social hierarchy. The ability to collect rare and exotic objects depended on access to global trade networks and economic resources, linking the production of knowledge to emerging forms of political and economic power (Barringer & Flynn, 1998).

From an analytical standpoint, the Renaissance marks the beginning of what may be termed the *objectification of knowledge* in which material objects become central to epistemic processes. This shift laid the foundation for subsequent developments in museum practices, particularly the systematic classification and public accessibility that emerged during the Enlightenment (Bennett, 1995). Moreover, this transformation reflects a broader shift in human

consciousness from reliance on textual authority toward an increasing emphasis on observation and sensory experience. The world began to be understood not only through interpretation but through direct engagement with its material manifestations.

In conclusion, *Wunderkammer* represent a critical transitional moment in the evolution of museums, where objects emerged as central epistemic agents. Although lacking systematic organization, these collections established the foundations for the modern museum as an institution structured around the collection, display, and interpretation of material culture.

The Enlightenment: Rationalization and Systematic Classification of Knowledge

The Enlightenment period represents a decisive transformation in the development of museums, marking the transition from curiosity-driven collections to systematically organized institutions grounded in scientific rationality. This shift reflects broader intellectual developments characterized by empiricism, classification, and the belief that knowledge could be ordered and understood through reason (Bennett, 1995; Porter, 2000).

Unlike the *Wunderkammer*, which emphasized wonder and diversity, Enlightenment museums prioritized order, structure, and classification. Objects were no longer valued solely for their rarity or aesthetic appeal, but for their capacity to represent broader systems of knowledge. This transformation reflects a fundamental epistemological shift from curiosity-based accumulation to rational organization (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Pomian, 1990).

The establishment of the British Museum in 1753 serves as a key example of this transformation. As one of the first public museums, it integrated diverse collections including manuscripts, antiquities, and natural history specimens into a structured institutional framework designed for public education (Bennett, 1995; MacGregor, 2007). This marked a significant departure from elite-controlled collections, introducing the idea that knowledge should be accessible to a broader audience.

Similarly, the transformation of the Louvre Museum into a public institution following the French Revolution reflects the democratization of knowledge and the redefinition of cultural heritage as a collective asset (Duncan, 1995; Poulot, 1997). Art collections that had previously symbolized royal power were recontextualized as part of a shared national and cultural identity.

A crucial development during this period was the emergence of scientific classification systems, particularly in the natural sciences. The work of Carl Linnaeus introduced a standardized method for categorizing living organisms through binomial nomenclature, enabling systematic organization across collections (Linnaeus, 1758/2007). This taxonomic model was widely adopted in museums, influencing the arrangement of botanical, zoological, and geological specimens (Jardine, Secord, & Spary, 1996).

The adoption of classification systems transformed museums into structured epistemic environments where objects were arranged according to universal principles. This development reflects what Michel Foucault (1970) describes as the emergence of an *episteme* a framework that defines how knowledge is organized and understood within a given historical period. In this sense, museum classification systems did not merely organize objects but shaped the very conditions under which knowledge could be produced.

Furthermore, the Enlightenment museum contributed to the construction of temporal and cultural narratives through its organizational logic. Artefacts were arranged chronologically

or geographically, reinforcing linear models of historical progress. This structure allowed museums to present history as a coherent and ordered sequence, aligning with Enlightenment ideals of progress and rationality (Bennett, 1995).

However, this rationalization also introduced new forms of epistemic authority. By determining how objects were categorized and interpreted, museums established frameworks that defined what constituted legitimate knowledge. As such, classification systems functioned not only as tools of organization but also as mechanisms of intellectual control (Foucault, 1980; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

Additionally, the Enlightenment period marked a growing separation between objects and their original cultural or spiritual contexts. In prioritizing scientific description and categorization, museums often abstracted objects from their meanings, reducing them to specimens within a broader system of knowledge. This development contributed to the emergence of a secular epistemology in which material properties were privileged over symbolic or metaphysical interpretations (Taylor, 2007).

From an analytical perspective, the Enlightenment can be understood as the foundational moment in the formation of the modern museum. The principles of classification, public accessibility, and systematic knowledge organization established during this period continue to shape contemporary museum practices.

At the same time, this transformation also reveals the limitations of Enlightenment epistemology. While it enabled the development of structured knowledge systems, it also introduced forms of reductionism that separated objects from their broader contexts. This tension between organization and meaning remains a central issue in museum studies.

In conclusion, the Enlightenment period represents a critical turning point in the evolution of museums, transforming them into institutions that systematically organize and produce knowledge. This transformation not only redefined the role of museums but also established the epistemological foundations that continue to influence museum practices in subsequent periods.

The Colonial Era: Museums as Instruments of Power and Representation

The colonial period represents a decisive phase in the historical development of museums, during which these institutions became deeply embedded within structures of imperial power. Unlike earlier periods, where museums primarily functioned as systems of knowledge organization, colonial-era museums operated as instruments that actively shaped global narratives through the collection and representation of objects from colonized regions (Coombes, 1994; Barringer & Flynn, 1998).

The expansion of European empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries facilitated unprecedented access to cultural and natural resources across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Museums became central nodes within this imperial network, collecting artefacts and specimens that were transported to metropolitan centres in Europe. These collections were then reorganized and displayed in ways that reflected Western epistemological frameworks (Mitchell, 1988; Thomas, 1991).

A prominent example is the display of the Benin Bronzes in the British Museum. These artefacts were seized during the British punitive expedition to Benin in 1897, an event

characterized by military violence and systematic looting (Hicks, 2020). Within the museum context, however, these objects were reframed as universal heritage, often detached from their original cultural, political, and historical significance.

This process of decontextualization illustrates how museums functioned as mechanisms of representation that reshaped the meanings of objects. Artefacts were no longer interpreted within their indigenous epistemological frameworks but were instead incorporated into narratives that emphasized Western notions of civilization and progress (Coombes, 1994).

Ethnographic exhibitions further reinforced these dynamics. Nineteenth-century displays frequently categorized non-Western societies as *primitive*, positioning them in contrast to the perceived advancement of European cultures. These representations were not incidental but formed part of a broader ideological project that sought to legitimize colonial domination (Clifford, 1988; Karp & Lavine, 1991). In extreme cases, colonial exhibitions included so-called *human zoos* where individuals from colonized regions were displayed as living specimens. Events such as the Exposition *Universelle* in Paris exemplify how museums and exhibitions blurred the boundaries between scientific display and racialized spectacle, reinforcing hierarchical models of humanity (Blanchard et al., 2008).

The role of museums in the natural sciences further demonstrates the entanglement of knowledge and imperial power. Specimens collected from tropical regions were classified and studied within European institutions, contributing to the development of scientific knowledge while simultaneously reinforcing colonial authority over nature and territory (Drayton, 2000).

From a theoretical perspective, these developments align closely with the power and knowledge framework articulated by Michel Foucault (1980), which posits that knowledge is produced within institutional structures that shape and regulate what is accepted as truth. In colonial museums, classification, display, and interpretation functioned as mechanisms through which power was exercised and maintained. Moreover, the categorization of objects into domains such as *fine art*, *archaeology* and *ethnography* reflects underlying hierarchies that privileged Western cultural forms over others. These classifications were not neutral but embedded within ideological frameworks that positioned Europe as the centre of civilization (Macdonald, 2006; Bennett, 1995).

The circulation of objects from colonized regions to European museums also reveals asymmetrical relationships in the production of knowledge. While cultural artefacts were extracted and studied in metropolitan institutions, the voices and perspectives of source communities were largely excluded. This imbalance underscores the role of museums in reproducing global inequalities in knowledge production (Thomas, 1991; Hicks, 2020). Analytically, the colonial era represents the stage at which museums fully emerged as institutions of power and knowledge. Unlike earlier periods, where epistemological transformations were primarily intellectual, this phase demonstrates how museums actively participated in political and ideological processes on a global scale.

At the same time, the colonial museum established structures that continue to shape contemporary practices. Systems of classification, modes of display, and institutional hierarchies developed during this period remain embedded within modern museum frameworks, even as they are increasingly subjected to critique. In conclusion, the colonial period reveals that museums are not neutral institutions but are deeply implicated in the production and legitimization of power. By shaping how cultures and histories are represented,

museums played a central role in constructing global narratives that supported colonial ideologies. These legacy forms the basis for subsequent critiques in the postcolonial period, where efforts are made to reassess and transform museum practices.

The Postcolonial Era: Critique, Reform, and the Limits of Transformation

The postcolonial period marks a significant phase in the evolution of museums, characterized by critical reflection on the historical role of these institutions in reproducing colonial power structures. Unlike the colonial era, where museums functioned as instruments of imperial authority, the postcolonial period introduced efforts to reassess and reform museum practices in response to growing awareness of issues related to representation, ownership, and cultural justice (Vergo, 1989; Macdonald, 2013).

A central development during this period is the emergence of *new museology*, which reconceptualizes museums as socially embedded institutions involved in the construction of meaning and identity rather than neutral repositories of knowledge (Vergo, 1989). This perspective emphasizes that museum narratives are shaped by cultural, political, and institutional contexts, thereby challenging earlier assumptions of objectivity and neutrality.

Scholars such as Clifford (1988) and Karp and Lavine (1991) highlight how museum representations have historically marginalized non-Western perspectives by framing them within Western interpretive frameworks. These critiques led to increasing calls for more inclusive and participatory approaches to curation, particularly involving source communities whose cultural heritage had been appropriated or misrepresented. In response, many museums began to adopt collaborative practices that engage indigenous and local communities in the interpretation and presentation of their heritage. Examples from Australia and Canada demonstrate how co-curation initiatives have allowed indigenous voices to shape exhibition narratives, thereby challenging traditional curatorial authority (Peers & Brown, 2003). These practices reflect a shift toward recognizing the plurality of perspectives in the construction of knowledge.

Another major development in the postcolonial era is the growing movement for repatriation, which calls for the return of cultural artefacts to their countries or communities of origin. Debates surrounding objects such as the Benin Bronzes highlight the ethical and political dimensions of museum collections, emphasizing the need to address historical injustices in acquisition practices (Hicks, 2020).

Despite these reforms, the analysis reveals that changes in the postcolonial period are often limited to representational adjustments rather than fundamental transformations of epistemological structures. While museums have become more inclusive in terms of narrative and participation, their underlying frameworks such as classification systems, institutional hierarchies, and disciplinary divisions remain largely rooted in Western intellectual traditions established during the Enlightenment (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

For instance, even in collaborative exhibitions, the organizational logic of displays often continues to rely on categories such as *art*, *archaeology* and *ethnography* which were historically constructed within Western epistemologies. This suggests that while the content of museum narratives may change, the structures that shape how knowledge is organized and interpreted remain relatively stable.

Furthermore, efforts to incorporate multiple perspectives can sometimes lead to conceptual fragmentation. In attempting to accommodate diverse viewpoints, museums may struggle to present coherent narratives, raising questions about how to balance inclusivity with interpretive clarity (Macdonald, 2013). This tension highlights the challenges of transforming institutions that are deeply embedded within established knowledge systems. From an analytical perspective, the postcolonial era can be understood as a phase of reflexivity in which museums become aware of their own role in shaping knowledge and representation. However, this awareness does not necessarily translate into structural transformation. Instead, it often results in incremental reforms that coexist with enduring epistemological frameworks.

This dynamic reflects the limitations of critique when not accompanied by alternative epistemological models. While postcolonial museology successfully exposes the biases and inequalities embedded in traditional museum practices, it does not always provide a comprehensive framework for rethinking the foundations of museum knowledge.

In conclusion, the postcolonial period represents a critical turning point in museum studies, marked by increased awareness of issues related to power, representation, and justice. However, the persistence of underlying epistemological structures suggests that the transformation of museums requires not only representational reform but also a deeper reconsideration of the knowledge systems that underpin institutional practices.

The Contemporary Era: Museums as Global Epistemic Institutions

The contemporary period represents a phase of expansion and transformation in the role of museums, where these institutions have evolved beyond their traditional functions of collection and display to become active participants in the production of knowledge, identity, and global cultural discourse. This transformation is shaped by processes of globalization, technological advancement, and increasing awareness of social responsibility within cultural institutions (Macdonald, 2013; Janes & Sandell, 2019).

In contrast to earlier periods, contemporary museums are increasingly characterized by their engagement with diverse audiences and their emphasis on inclusivity, dialogue, and participation. Museums are no longer conceived solely as authoritative institutions that transmit knowledge, but as spaces where knowledge is negotiated and co-produced through interaction between institutions and communities (Simon, 2010; Janes & Sandell, 2019).

A significant example of this shift can be observed in the development of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which presents itself as a *universal museum* that brings together objects from different civilizations within a shared narrative framework. Rather than organizing collections strictly along geographical or national lines, the museum emphasizes thematic connections across cultures, reflecting an attempt to construct a more interconnected and global understanding of history (Macdonald, 2013).

At the same time, digital technology has fundamentally transformed museum practices. The digitization of collections and the development of online platforms have expanded access to cultural heritage, allowing global audiences to engage with museum content beyond physical spaces. Institutions such as the British Museum have developed extensive digital archives, enabling users to explore artefacts and associated knowledge remotely (Parry, 2010).

This digital turn has redefined the relationship between museums and their audiences. Visitors are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants who can interact with, reinterpret, and even contribute to museum narratives. This participatory model reflects a broader shift toward democratization in knowledge production (Simon, 2010).

In addition, contemporary museums increasingly engage with pressing social and political issues, including colonial legacies, migration, identity, and environmental sustainability. Exhibitions addressing these themes demonstrate a growing recognition of the museum's role as a socially responsive institution (Janes & Sandell, 2019).

However, despite these significant transformations, the analysis reveals that the underlying epistemological foundations of museums remain largely influenced by Western traditions established during the Enlightenment. Classification systems, disciplinary boundaries, and curatorial frameworks continue to reflect rationalist and scientific paradigms that structure how knowledge is organized and interpreted (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

For instance, even within global and inclusive narratives, categories such as *art*, *archaeology* and *ethnography* persist as organizing principles. These categories shape how objects are understood and limit the extent to which alternative epistemologies can be fully integrated into museum practice.

Furthermore, the concept of the *universal museum* itself has been subject to critique. While it promotes inclusivity and cross-cultural dialogue, it may also reproduce earlier patterns of centralization by positioning certain institutions as global authorities over diverse cultural heritage (Macdonald, 2013; Hicks, 2020).

From an analytical perspective, the contemporary era can be understood as a stage of epistemic expansion rather than epistemic transformation. Museums have broadened their functions and audiences, yet the fundamental structures that govern knowledge production remain relatively stable.

These dynamic highlights a key tension within contemporary museology: the coexistence of progressive practices with enduring epistemological frameworks. While museums increasingly acknowledge issues of representation and inclusivity, they continue to operate within systems that shape and limit how knowledge is produced.

In conclusion, the contemporary museum represents a complex and dynamic institution that operates at the intersection of globalization, technology, and social engagement. Its evolution reflects both the possibilities and limitations of institutional transformation, underscoring the need for deeper epistemological reconsideration to achieve more comprehensive and meaningful change.

Analytical Synthesis: Museums as Epistemic Institutions and the Evolution of Human Consciousness

The findings of this study demonstrate that the historical development of museums cannot be adequately understood as a linear institutional progression. Rather, museums must be conceptualized as epistemic institutions that reflect and shape broader transformations in knowledge systems, power structures, and human consciousness. Each historical phase represents a distinct configuration of how knowledge is produced, organized, and interpreted.
In the classical era, knowledge was grounded in textual scholarship, with institutions such as

the *mouseion* functioning as centres of intellectual exchange rather than spaces of visual representation (Casson, 2001; Bagnall, 2002). This configuration reflects an epistemology in which meaning was derived primarily through interpretation and scholarly discourse.

The Renaissance period introduced a significant shift toward object-based knowledge through *Wunderkammer*, where material objects became central to the exploration of the natural and cultural world. This transition marked the emergence of empirical engagement, although interpretation remained influenced by symbolic and aesthetic frameworks (Findlen, 1994; Daston & Park, 1998).

The Enlightenment further transformed museums by introducing systematic classification and rational organization. Objects were incorporated into structured systems that reflected broader scientific and intellectual paradigms, thereby establishing the foundations of the modern museum (Bennett, 1995; Foucault, 1970).

However, this rationalization also facilitated the expansion of museums as instruments of power during the colonial era. The collection and display of artefacts from colonized regions were embedded within imperial structures, producing narratives that reinforced Western dominance and hierarchical representations of culture (Coombes, 1994; Hicks, 2020).

The postcolonial period introduced critical reflections on these practices, leading to efforts to reform museum narratives and incorporate more inclusive perspectives. Despite these developments, the analysis reveals that such reforms often remain limited to representational adjustments, while underlying epistemological structures persist (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

In the contemporary era, museums have expanded into global epistemic institutions that actively shape cultural discourse through digital platforms, participatory practices, and transnational narratives (Janes & Sandell, 2019; Parry, 2010). However, these developments largely extend rather than fundamentally transform existing epistemological frameworks.

From this analysis, three major epistemological transitions can be identified. First, the shift from text-based knowledge to object-based knowledge. Second, the transformation of objects from sources of knowledge into instruments of power and representation. Third, the emergence of museums as global institutions that produce and regulate knowledge within complex social and technological contexts.

These transitions highlight the central role of museums in shaping not only knowledge but also the conditions under which knowledge is understood. As Michel Foucault (1980) argues, knowledge is inseparable from power, and museums function as sites where this relationship is institutionalized. Through processes of collection, classification, and display, museums establish frameworks that define what is visible, meaningful, and legitimate.

Beyond institutional transformation, the evolution of museums also reflects broader shifts in human consciousness. The progression from text-based epistemologies to empirical observation, followed by systematic classification and critical reflexivity, suggests a dynamic trajectory in how humans understand reality. This trajectory involves movement from integrated systems of knowledge toward increasingly differentiated and specialized forms of understanding.

At the same time, contemporary developments indicate a growing recognition of the limitations of fragmented epistemologies. Efforts to reintroduce meaning, identity, and context into museum practices reflect attempts to move toward more holistic approaches to knowledge.

In this context, the concept of Islamic consciousness provides an additional interpretive dimension. Islamic intellectual traditions emphasize the unity of knowledge, integrating material and non-material dimensions within a coherent epistemological framework (Al-Attas, 1995; Rahman, 1980). From this perspective, heritage is not merely a collection of physical objects but a system of meanings that connects human experience to broader metaphysical and ethical contexts.

This perspective highlights that the separation between material and spiritual knowledge in modern museology is historically contingent rather than epistemologically necessary. Consequently, the evolution of museums may also be understood as part of a broader movement in human consciousness from integrated knowledge systems to fragmented epistemologies, and potentially toward renewed attempts at synthesis.

In conclusion, the synthesis of findings demonstrates that museums are complex and dynamic institutions that operate at the intersection of knowledge, power, and cultural meaning. Their historical evolution reflects not only institutional change but also deeper transformations in how humans conceptualize and engage with reality. This understanding provides a foundation for rethinking museum practices in ways that move beyond inherited epistemological limitations toward more comprehensive and inclusive frameworks.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive basis for understanding museums not merely as cultural institutions but as epistemic systems that operate at the intersection of knowledge production, power structures, and historical transformation. This section discusses the implications of these findings by relating them to the theoretical framework and existing literature.

Museums as Epistemic Institutions

The analysis confirms that museums function as epistemic institutions rather than neutral repositories of artefacts. Across historical periods, museums have actively participated in structuring, organizing, and legitimizing knowledge through processes of collection, classification, and display.

This finding aligns with museological theories proposed by Hooper-Greenhill (1992), which emphasize that museums reflect specific *orders of knowledge* shaped by prevailing intellectual paradigms. The transition from text-based scholarship in the classical era to object-based systems in the Renaissance and Enlightenment demonstrates how museums evolve in tandem with broader epistemological shifts.

Furthermore, the integration of classification systems during the Enlightenment illustrates how museums became structured environments for knowledge production. These systems did not merely organize objects but also defined the conditions under which knowledge could be understood, reinforcing the argument that museums function as epistemic frameworks rather than passive spaces (Foucault, 1970).

The Interrelationship between Knowledge and Power

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the inseparability of knowledge and power within museum contexts. The findings from the colonial period clearly illustrate how museums operated as instruments of imperial authority, shaping global narratives through selective representation and classification (Coombes, 1994; Hicks, 2020). This supports the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault (1980), which posits that knowledge is produced within institutional structures that regulate what is considered true. Museums, in this sense, function as sites where power is exercised through the control of representation, interpretation, and narrative construction.

Even in the contemporary period, this relationship persists, albeit in more complex forms. While museums increasingly adopt inclusive and participatory approaches, they continue to operate within institutional frameworks that shape how knowledge is produced and disseminated (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

Reform without Epistemological Transformation

The findings also reveal a critical tension within contemporary museology: the coexistence of progressive reforms with enduring epistemological structures. Postcolonial critiques have led to significant changes in representation, including the inclusion of indigenous perspectives and the reconsideration of colonial collections (Peers & Brown, 2003; Macdonald, 2013).

However, these reforms often remain limited to the level of narrative and participation, without fundamentally altering the underlying structures of knowledge production. Classification systems, disciplinary divisions, and institutional hierarchies continue to reflect Enlightenment-based epistemologies (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

This suggests that contemporary transformations in museums are better understood as epistemic expansions rather than epistemic shifts. While museums have broadened their scope and inclusivity, they have not yet undergone a comprehensive restructuring of their foundational knowledge systems.

Toward a More Holistic Epistemology

The analysis further indicates that recent developments in museology reflect a growing awareness of the limitations of fragmented epistemologies. Efforts to incorporate meaning, identity, and context into museum narratives suggest a movement toward more holistic approaches to knowledge.

In this regard, the concept of Islamic consciousness provides an additional interpretive lens. Unlike Enlightenment epistemology, which often separates material and non-material dimensions of knowledge, Islamic intellectual traditions emphasize the unity of knowledge, integrating physical, ethical, and metaphysical aspects (Al-Attas, 1995; Rahman, 1980).

Although not widely applied in mainstream museology, this perspective highlights the possibility of rethinking museum practices in ways that move beyond reductionist frameworks. It suggests that the evolution of museums may involve not only institutional reform but also a broader reconfiguration of epistemological assumptions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes to museum scholarship in several ways. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of museums as epistemic institutions by integrating historical analysis with epistemological and power-based frameworks. This approach provides a more comprehensive explanation of museum evolution than studies that focus solely on institutional or representational aspects.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for museum practitioners to critically engage with the epistemological foundations of their work. This includes reconsidering classification systems, curatorial practices, and interpretive frameworks to ensure that museums can function as inclusive and meaningful spaces for diverse audiences.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of developing alternative epistemological approaches that can complement or challenge dominant frameworks. Such approaches may enable museums to better address issues of representation, identity, and cultural justice in a globalized context.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the historical development of museums through a comprehensive chronological and epistemological analysis, covering six major periods: the classical, Renaissance, Enlightenment, colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary eras. The findings demonstrate that museums have evolved not merely as institutional spaces for the preservation of artefacts, but as dynamic epistemic systems that actively shape knowledge, historical narratives, and cultural consciousness.

The analysis reveals that each historical phase reflects distinct epistemological configurations, ranging from text-based knowledge systems in the classical era to object-cantered approaches in the Renaissance, and subsequently to structured classification systems during the Enlightenment. These developments laid the foundation for the emergence of museums as powerful institutions of knowledge production.

However, the study also highlights that the role of museums extends beyond knowledge organization. During the colonial period, museums became instruments of power that constructed global narratives through selective representation and classification. Although the postcolonial and contemporary periods have introduced critical perspectives and more inclusive practices, the underlying epistemological structures of museums remain largely influenced by Western intellectual traditions established during the Enlightenment.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its integrative approach, which connects historical development with epistemological transformation and power relations. By conceptualizing museums as epistemic institutions, this research provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding their role in shaping knowledge and meaning across different historical contexts.

Furthermore, the study introduces an interpretive extension through the concept of Islamic consciousness, which emphasizes the integration of material and non-material dimensions of knowledge. This perspective suggests the potential for developing more holistic approaches to museology that move beyond reductionist frameworks and address the

limitations of fragmented epistemologies. In terms of implications, the findings underscore the need for a deeper reconsideration of the epistemological foundations of museum practices. While recent developments have expanded inclusivity and participation, meaningful transformation requires engagement with the underlying structures that shape how knowledge is organized and interpreted. Future research may explore empirical dimensions of museum engagement, particularly how audiences interact with and interpret museum narratives across different cultural contexts. Comparative studies involving institutions in diverse regions, including the Islamic world, may further enrich understanding of alternative epistemological approaches in museology.

In conclusion, museums are complex and evolving institutions situated at the intersection of knowledge, power, and cultural meaning. Their continued development depends not only on institutional reform but also on the ability to critically engage with and reimagine the epistemological frameworks that underpin their practices.

REFERENCES

Ab Halim Ismail, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Ibrahim Majdi Mohamad Kamil (2025) Konsep Muzium Dalam Perspektif Barat Dan Isu Kearifan Tempatan Melayu-Islam: Satu Sorotan Awal, *MINDEN Journal of History and Archaelogy* 2(1) 179-194

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Ahnaf Wafi Alias & Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim (2025), Muzium Universal Sebagai Bentuk Neo-Kolonialisme, *Jurnal Arkeologi Malaysia* 38(2), 1-11

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Awang Azman Awang Pawi & Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim (2020) Konsep Muzium Baru: Analisis Kritikal Pemikiran Kolonial Terhadap Bangsa Melayu, *Jurnal Melayu Sedunia,* 3(1):122-147.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Ibrahim Majdi Mohamad Kamil & Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim. (2025). Reclaiming Epistemic Authority: The Role of Muslim Museum Curators in Shaping Historical and Cultural Narratives. *International Journal of Islamic Products and Malay Civilization*, 4(2), 19-32.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Ibrahim Majdi Mohamad Kamil dan Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim (2026), Simbiosis Ilmu Kolonial dan Institusi Muzium: Analisis Pascakolonial Terhadap Representasi Kuasa dan Dekolonisasi, *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation* 14(1), 96 – 103

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abd. Rahim, Awang Azman Bin Awang Pawi, Muhd Imran Abdul Razak (2021), Pengalaman Pameran Muzium Islam Di Muzium Semasa: Satu Pengenalan, *Journal Ideology*, 6(1), 49-64.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abd. Rahim, Muhd Imran Abdul Razak (2022), Etika Muzium Dalam Disiplin Muzium Semasa: Suatu Sorotan, *Jurnal UMRAN,* 9(2), 1-17.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim (2022), Falsafah Pasca Kolonialisme Di Alam Melayu Dalam Sorotan, *Menangani Kelestarian Pengajian Islam di Malaysia,* Penerbit Kolej Universiti Islam Melaka, 2022, 139-168.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Ahnaf wafi Alias dan siti maimunah kahal (2023), Intipati Islamisasi Galeri dan Muzium di Pahang: Satu Tinjauan Eksplorasi. *Jurnal Peradaban*, 16(1), 1- 25.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Ahnaf Wafi Alias & Siti Maimunah

Kahal (2022), Artifak Muzium Sebagai Cermin Kepada Worldview melayu: Kajian Di Muzium Abu Bakar Pekan Pahang, *Jurnal Arkeologi Malaysia*, 35(2), 89- 106.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Awang Azman Awang Pawi (2022), Manuskrip Hukum Kanun Pahang: Antara Kepentingan Dan Kritikan Sarjana Kolonial, *Jurnal Melayu Sedunia*, 5(1), 89-99.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Awang Azman Awang Pawi (2022) Hukum Kanun Pahang Sebagai Korpus Perundangan Tempatan Melayu Pahang, *Persidangan Antarabangsa Manuskrip Melayu (PAMM) 2022* pada 9–11 Ogos 2022 di Dewan Tuanku Canselor, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Tanjung Malim, Perak.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Mohamad Hilmi Mad Said, Awang Azman Awang Pawi (2022), Impak Falsafah Pasca-Kolonialism Terhadap Muzium: Satu Analisis Kritikal, *International Journal of Humanities Technology and Civilization (IJHTC)*, 7(2). 1-9.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Muhammad Jumaidy Abdul Manap (2022), Perkembangan Institusi Memori (LAM) Pada Era British di Tanah Melayu, Sejarah: *Journal of History Department, University of Malay*a; 31(1), 34-64.

Ahmad Farid Abd Jalal, Siti Maimunah Kahal & Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim (2023). Pembinaan garis panduan muzium patuh syariah di Malaysia. Melayu: *Jurnal Antarabangsa Dunia Melayu*, 16(1), 141–158.

Ahmad Farid Abdul Jalal, Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, Mohamad Hilmi Mat Said, Awang Azman Awang Pawi (2023), Kemasukan Pengaruh Islam Dalam Pembentukan Sejarah Negara Bangsa Malaysia, *International Journal of Humanities Technology and Civilization*, 8(1), 74 – 83.

Aiza Maslan @ Baharudin. (2024) Peranan Muzium Di Malaysia dalam Melestarikan Sejarah dan Warisan (The Role of Museum in Malaysia in Preserving Hajj History and Heritage). *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 7(1): 156-166

Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1995). *Prolegomena to the metaphysics of Islam*. ISTAC.

Bagnall, R. S. (2002). Alexandria: Library of dreams. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 146*(4), 348–362.

Barringer, T., & Flynn, T. (1998). *Colonialism and the object*. Routledge.

Bennett, T. (1995). *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. Routledge.

Blanchard, P., Bancel, N., Boëtsch, G., Deroo, E., & Lemaire, S. (2008). *Human zoos: Science and spectacle in the age of colonial empires*. Liverpool University Press.

Casson, L. (2001). *Libraries in the ancient world*. Yale University Press.

Clifford, J. (1988). *The predicament of culture*. Harvard University Press.

Coombes, A. E. (1994). *Reinventing Africa: Museums, material culture and popular imagination*. Yale University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). Sage.

Daston, L., & Park, K. (1998). *Wonders and the order of nature*. Zone Books.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.

Drayton, R. (2000). *Nature's government: Science, imperial Britain, and the "improvement" of the world*. Yale University Press.

Duncan, C. (1995). *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. Routledge.

Evans, R. J. W. (1973). *Rudolf II and his world*. Oxford University Press.

Findlen, P. (1994). *Possessing nature: Museums, collecting, and scientific culture in early modern Italy*. University of California Press.

Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things*. Vintage.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. Pantheon.

Halim @ Ab Halim Ismail, Ariyanti Mustapha, Rushdi Ramli & Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim. (2025) Sejarah Muzium dan Kaitannya Dengan Persoalan Etika: Satu Analisis Literatur. *Islamic Journal of Cultural Studies* (IJCS), 1(1), 65-73

Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical approaches*. Routledge.Hicks, D. (2020). *The British museums: The Benin Bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution*. Pluto Press.

Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*. Routledge.

Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*. Routledge.

Ibrahim Majdi Mohamad Kamil, Ahmad Farid Abdul Jalal, Siti Maimunah Kahal & Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim. (2025). Exploring The Need for Islamic Museology in Contemporary Museum Development. *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 8(1): 192-204

Janes, R. R., & Sandell, R. (2019). *Museum activism*. Routledge.

Jardine, N., Secord, J. A., & Spary, E. C. (1996). *Cultures of natural history*. Cambridge University Press.

Karp, I., & Lavine, S. D. (1991). *Exhibiting cultures*. Smithsonian Institution Press.

Linnaeus, C. (2007). *Systema naturae* (10th ed., original work published 1758).

Macdonald, S. (2006). *A companion to museum studies*. Blackwell.

Macdonald, S. (2013). *Memorylands: Heritage and identity in Europe today*. Routledge.

MacGregor, N. (2007). *Curiosity and enlightenment: Collectors and collections from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century*. Yale University Press.

Mitchell, T. (1988). *Colonising Egypt*. Cambridge University Press.

Parry, R. (2010). *Museums in a digital age*. Routledge.

Peers, L., & Brown, A. K. (2003). *Museums and source communities*. Routledge.

Pomian, K. (1990). *Collectors and curiosities: Paris and Venice 1500–1800*. Polity Press.

Porter, R. (2000). *The Enlightenment*. Palgrave.

Poulot, D. (1997). *Museum and the French Revolution*. University of Chicago Press.

Rahman, F. (1980). *Major themes of the Qur'an*. University of Chicago Press.

Sandell, R. (2007). *Museums, prejudice and the reframing of difference*. Routledge.

Simon, N. (2010). *The participatory museum*. Museum 2.0.

Siti Fatimah Datu Ali Nafiah (2021), Kesenian Tamadun Islam Dalam Warisan Seni Tradisi Melayu. *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 4(2): 162-167

Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. Routledge.

Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Harvard University Press.

Thomas, N. (1991). *Entangled objects*. Harvard University Press.

Tosh, J. (2015). *The pursuit of history*. Routledge.
Vergo, P. (1989). *The new museology*. Reaktion Books.