



Universal Histories and Universal Museums: a transnational comparison

Since the late eighteenth century, alongside Enlightenment philosophy on human rights, western European scholars have conceptualised human universality in universal histories and universal museums. In its investigation of the evolution of museum collections, the 'Universal Histories and Universal Museums' project strongly connects with the third objective of both the 'The Past in the Present' and the 'Care for the Future' programmes: the mediation, and the cultural and social appropriation of the past, from transnational perspectives.

Looking at the history of museum collections is one of the ways in which we can examine how history is made, displayed and disseminated through the uses, legacies and representations of the past. Our research will highlight the constituent features of encyclopaedic knowledge about western universal human histories, from the nineteenth century to the present day. It will also examine the assumptions and limitations of such understanding. In particular, the project seeks to address questions regarding the representation of the diversity of cultures that define human universality, the articulation of historical and anthropological approaches to the description of humanity and the influence of social knowledge practices on the structuring of universal knowledge. The project also considers ways thinking about the past help us to prepare for a global future that incorporates more diverse universalities.

The first phase of the project will combine critical investigation through four workshops and two historical case studies, based in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Musée du quai Branly. The project's second phase will consolidate the first phase research in a small exhibition based on the two case studies, and a conference timed to align with the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi - a contemporary universal museum. Publications will include a book, articles in peer-reviewed journals and digitisation of key archival resources.