



Museums in contemporary society

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What are museums for? In this album we look behind the displays to reveal the conflicting roles, power struggles and ethical dilemmas that affect museums today. Once the undisputed sources of authority on the objects in their care, museums now have to justify their decisions to the government, to their audiences, sometimes even to vociferous pagans. The challenge is to reach out to new audiences and devise new ways of communicating with them. The rewards are many: to maintain status and respect, to win hearts and influence people, even to foster a warm sense of nationhood. This album also contains academic perspectives from Tim Benton, Professor of Art History at the Open University; Laurajane Smith, Reader in Heritage Studies at the University of York; and Rodney Harrison, Lecturer in Heritage Studies at the Open University. This material forms part of the Open University course AD281 Understanding Global Heritage.

You can discover something of what it's like to study the course by using the downloadable 'activities' files to explore different views on what counts as heritage, the way in which museums are involved in the production of a sense of collective identity and nationhood, and how the study of museums connects with the study of other forms of heritage in contemporary society.