It has long been said that the arts nourish the soul; fuelling our imagination and quenching our curiosity whilst nurturing a sense of belonging and interconnectedness in our world. Museums, usually side-lined as cultural heritage, can embody these attributes too. Yet the existential value of museums is often overlooked. We undermine their capability if we seek to define museums as secular temples of knowledge for the modern age. Museums today transcend their origins as repositories for showcasing objects; now the object back-story is the lynchpin, empowering museums to function as cerebral gyms that can stir our moods and exercise our emotions. Museums have become a communal sanctuary for us to reflect on the big questions such as: ‘Who are we?’, ‘What’s out there?’ and ‘Where did we come from?’. A well-designed exhibit can be a springboard for a numinous moment that can endure in our memories for years. So it is not surprising that museum objects are now being used as a tool to rehabilitate impaired memory function of those suffering from dementia. Could museums do more to investigate the relationship between physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing in their displays? The growth of diverse cultures in our national community ought to give the impetus to explore the intersectionalities between our hybrid identities through more ground-breaking programmes and displays. An enduring challenge is how to frame the contextual significance of objects. Seyyid Hossein Nasr, a historian of Islamic science, laments the profound psychological effects of ‘cultural dislocation’ manifest in museological representations:

*“Do not think that a science museum is simply neutral in its cultural impact. It has a tremendous impact upon those who go into it. If you go into a building in which one room is full of dinosaurs, the next room is full of wires, and the third is full of trains, you are going to have a segmented view of knowledge which is going to have a deep effect upon the young person who goes there, who has been taught about Tauhid, about Unity, about the Unity of knowledge. About the Unity of God, the Unity of the universe. There is going to be a dichotomy created in him. You must be able to integrate knowledge.”*

Paradoxically, if museums have contributed to the fracturing of our mind-sets, they can also be a source for restitution. Initiatives like the Happy Museum project are paving the way to reimagine the purpose of museums and cement the linkage between wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

We are leaning back towards more holistic frameworks of healthcare that encompass all the different facets of our daily life. The movement towards ‘wellbeing’ and ‘social justice’ in museums, can be paralleled with the evolution of hospitals; one of the earliest known hospitals was built in Damascus in 706 CE, becoming a model for more advanced hospitals that emerged later in Baghdad and Cairo. By the 12th Century these sophisticated hospitals were multidimensional in outlook – not just dispensing medicines and treatments but also considering the aesthetics in all its aspects, as documented in 1950 by philosopher and historian, Will Durant*:*

*“Within a spacious quadrangular enclosure four buildings rose around a courtyard adorned with arcades and cooled with fountains and brooks. There were separate wards for diverse diseases and for convalescents; laboratories, a dispensary, out-patient clinics, diet kitchens, baths, a library, a chapel, a lecture hall, and particularly pleasant accommodations for the insane. Treatment was given gratis to men and women, rich and poor, slave and free; and a sum of money was disbursed to each convalescent on his departure, so that he need not at once return to work. The sleepless were provided with soft music, professional story-tellers, and perhaps books of history.”*

Nowadays, our national hospitals routinely exhibit art work in situ as part of a 360-degree therapeutic package for in-patients. On the flipside, as public health is becoming more decentralised in the UK, NHS primary care services are starting to trial ‘museums on prescription’ referral schemes.

Of course, museums cannot be the panacea to all our mental ailments – perhaps they are at best, a much-needed pressure valve for our society? But we should not underestimate the ability for museums to play a more active role in healing. We must tap the further potential for museums to be a tonic for the soul.

Adapted from: *Museums: tonic for the soul* (pp.74-75) by Yasmin Khan, in ‘Where does it hurt? The New World of Medical Humanities’, Wellcome Trust, 2014

Illustration credit ©Paul Davis