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# When the arts inspire businesses: Museums as a heritage redefinition tool of brands

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## ABSTRACT

While the literature has mainly considered brand museums as communication tools or complex retail environments, this article analyses them through a heritage framework and suggests that brands can use heritage technologies of the arts for their own purposes. The case study of the brand museum of the Laughing Cow highlights the heritage technologies the brand uses to endorse two heritage roles: an inter-generational memory role based on the transmission of the brand's history and a community representation role through spaces and objects. As a consequence, this research sheds light on how brands can come to be accepted as heritage objects. By using heritage technologies within a museum, brands can capture heritage functions, and thus no longer fully rest in a market logic: the brand becomes a sacred and inalienable common good.

## 1. Introduction

The world of business provides inspiration for many cultural organizations. In the museum sector, the proliferation of shops, restaurants, and bars; the development of brands; and the increasing use of private sources of funding (sponsorship, endowment) illustrate this commodification trend of the arts. Though often criticized as a form of perversion (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007), the current place of arts in society cannot be assessed simply by looking at its shift toward the world of business and without taking into account the extent to which the world of business uses the arts in the opposite direction (Meisiek & Barry, 2014; Schiuma, 2011).

Analysis of the trend of the artification of goods is important for several reasons. As Medoff Kara Barnett, executive director of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (New York), notes, the “pollination of ideas” moves not only from the market to the arts but also from the arts to the market (<http://www.c2montreal.com/speaker/kara-medoff-barnett/>). Many examples illustrate this phenomenon—famous architects who design outlet malls (David Chipperfield for Valentino, Rem Koolhaas for Galeries Lafayette), capsule collections created by artists (Karl Lagerfeld and H & M, Takashi Murakami and Vans), and temporary exhibitions hosted within (flagship) stores, thus turning them into art galleries (UNIQLO flagship store in New York). Companies increasingly integrate creative and artistic dimensions into their strategies to find new sources of value in an increasing context of

trivialization of the commercial offer (Brellochs & Schrat, 2005).

One of the most visible signs of this artistic aspiration of companies is the proliferation of brand museums in many different sectors, as illustrated by the recent opening of the Aéroscopia museum by Airbus (France) and the future museums of Audemars Piguet (Switzerland), Nestlé (Switzerland), and IKEA (Sweden). The brand museum represents a “corporate facility with tangible objects and/or exhibits, displayed in a museum-like setting, that communicates the history, operations, and/or interests of a company to employees, guests, customers, and/or the public” (Danilov, 1992, p. 4). Brand museums are born from the alliance of two apparently dissonant entities (Byrom & Lehman, 2009) and thus constitute a promising field to examine the cross-fertilization of arts and management; and between culture and brands (Meisiek & Barry, 2014; Schiuma, 2011).

However, the literature largely considers brand museums from a praxeological perspective and treats them as communication tools (Nissley & Casey, 2002) or complex retail environments (Hollenbeck, Peters, & Zinkhan, 2008). But in exhibiting their brands in a museum, companies go beyond a purely commercial relationship with their customers to redefine their brands as heritage artifacts (Smith, 2006). Nevertheless, the museum orientation of brands remains poorly studied in the literature and thus raises several questions: (1) How can brands redefine themselves as heritage artifacts, such as collections of art objects? (2) Do visitors consider this registration of the brand in the heritage corpus legitimate? and (3) What are the consequences of brand

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museums for the brand?

To answer these questions, this article develops a heritage framework to analyze the heritage process at work in brand museums and the consequences for the brand. The article begins by explaining the contributions of the heritage interpretative framework to the existing literature. Then, a case study of the museum the Laughing Cow (industrial cheese brand) highlights the roles endorsed by the brand through the heritage process and identifies the museum techniques used to legitimate this registration in the heritage corpus. The study concludes with a general discussion of the findings, limitations, and avenues for further research.

## 2. Analyzing brand museums through a heritage framework

Though largely a research concern in the social sciences (Rodner & Preece, 2015; Schroeder, 2006), the relationship between art and business also appears in management and marketing (Joy, Wang, Chan, Sherry, & Cui, 2014; Meisiek & Barry, 2014). However, as Schiuma (2011, p. 1) argues, “in today’s complex business landscape, as organizations are challenged by new and increasingly complex problems, the arts provide a new ‘territory’ to inspire executives ... to see their organizations differently.” However, little is still known about how firms become involved in artistic activities and endorse the role of cultural agent (Chong, 2013).

### 2.1. Brand museums: from a praxeological to a heritage perspective

Some studies in management and marketing do examine brand museums. In particular, the management literature focuses on brand museums as spaces embodying organizational memory and suggests that organizations can use corporate museums strategically to improve their image (Burghausen & Balmer, 2014; Nissley & Casey, 2002). Through the sociological theory of the re-enchantment of consumption (Ritzer, 2005; Thompson, 2006), marketing studies consider brand museums complex retailing environments that mix entertainment and brand experiences (Hollenbeck et al., 2008; Kozinets et al., 2002). These studies are relevant for understanding the characteristics of organizational memory and its impact on corporate image (management perspective) and for identifying the structuration of a brand experience and its effects on consumers (marketing perspective). The findings suggest the praxeological goals of brand museums by exposing their external communication function (to demonstrate the quality and know-how of the brand), internal communication function (to create a social link between employees), and additional channel function through gift shops.

Although museum spaces have praxeological functions, the current argument differs from those discussed previously. Indeed, according to the International Council of Museums, the mission of a museum is to “acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (<http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition>). We argue that the praxeological function conceals a heritage function because of the process at work within the brand in museums. As Hollenbeck et al. (2008) note, brand museums integrate specific characteristics of museums (e.g., collection and exhibition of objects, specific displays, importance of educational aims). However, the heritage process that causes organizations and/or brands to move away from strategic and/or retailing objectives appears only tangentially in prior studies (Rose, Merchant, Orth, & Horstmann, 2016). Thus, we propose to analyze these “third spaces” (Oldenburg, 2001) through a heritage framework. By introducing this new theoretical perspective, this study offers insights into the consequences of brands’ quest for artistic legitimacy.

### 2.2. The legitimacy of the brand in the heritage corpus

To investigate brand museums through a heritage framework, we must define the notion of heritage to understand the legitimacy of introducing a brand in the heritage corpus. Lowenthal (1998) defines “heritage” as a legacy that society or social groups have created. The collective dimension of the definition is central because heritage creates social relationships within a group or a territory (Dicks, 2000). Heritage also represents a social construction that gives to a specific good the value of moving from the private to the public and collective spheres (Smith, 2006). The heritage process thus corresponds to the transformation of an object in a symbolic doppelgänger through a set of collectively accepted values (Smith, 2006).

The heritage process tends to spark much research enthusiasm, leading some scholars to describe the phenomenon as “heritage crusade” or “heritage inflation” (Heinich, 2009; Lowenthal, 1998). The continuous development of heritage can be explained by a fear of oblivion, which imposes on the society a duty of memory (Davison, 2005). Heritage also allows for the transmission of sacredness in the renewed symbolic system of disenchanted modern societies (Gauchet, 2005).

The extension of the heritage corpus paves the way for an ordinary heritage—as opposed to an extraordinary heritage—for objects or places at the heart of groups’ social identity construction (Grimwade & Carter, 2000). That is, a heritage rupture occurs in which the ‘time of monuments’ gives way to a ‘heritage time’ of everyday objects (Cleere, 2001). Thus, the heritage process practiced by official experts (arts institutions) leaves room for a heritage practiced by non-specialists (companies) searching to take over the values of an institutional heritage.

By creating museums dedicated to their brands, companies can assume the role of non-specialists artistic entrepreneurs and fully illustrate the phenomenon of ordinary heritage. Companies thus use, appropriate and accommodate what Rowlands and De Jong (2007) calls technologies of heritage, i.e. techniques and vocabulary used by heritage official experts. For companies, the willingness to register their brands at the heart of heritage ideology captured through museums reflects an institutional means to belong to the art world present in contemporary societies (Becker, 1982). Indeed, this process of museumification transforms the brand into “an idealized re-presentation of itself, wherein everything is considered not for its use but for its value as a potential museum artifact” (Di Giovine, 2008, p. 261).

The brand here assumes a cultural role and tries to expand beyond its original commercial world by associating itself with heritage functions, thus adding new symbolic meaning. However, the process by which the brand re-defines itself as a heritage artifact, such as a collection of art objects (Lowenthal, 1998), remains largely under-researched. With the circulation of the brand between the business world and the museum, understanding the role of the brand in this heritage process and the technologies from the museum world used to create a heritage artifact is important.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research site

The goal of this research is to understand the cultural orientation of brand museums, considered here as third places, through a heritage framework. To achieve this goal, we conducted an extended case study by analyzing the brand museum dedicated to the Laughing Cow located in France. The Laughing Cow is a cheese brand created in 1921 by the Bel Group (which had revenues of €2.8 billion in 2014). The Laughing Cow was originally created in Jura, a small French region close to Switzerland, but is now an international brand (present in 136 countries) due to industrial development and an original marketing strategy. In 2009, the Bel Group opened its brand museum in Lons-le-Saunier (Jura, France), a 27,000-square-foot museum called the Laughing Cow

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