

The Return of Absence: Loss, Visibility, and Museological Presence in Museums

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Abstract. This article examines absence as a museological condition as well as a curatorial category rather than as a mere lack of objects. Through diverse cases of displaced heritage, destroyed sites, damaged artworks, restoration practices, and loaned objects, it analyzes how museums render loss, exclusion, and displacement visible to the audiences. The article distinguishes four main modes of absence: institutional absence, produced by regimes of classification and power; historical absence, generated by disaster, violence, and temporal loss; curatorial absence, deliberately maintained as a strategy of exhibition display; and mobility absence, caused by the circulation of objects through loans, conservation, and transport. By reading these cases through relevant theories of memory, authenticity, and the distribution of visibility, the article further argues that absence in itself can function as a form of presence, insofar as it does not only signify emptiness but actively and concretely participates in shaping visitors' perception of history and cultural value.

Keywords: absence, presence, museum, curation

1. Introduction

Museums are institutions dedicated to the research, collection, preservation, and display of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Their authority usually appears to rest on the objects they make present: sculptures, paintings, manuscripts, archaeological remains, and other material traces. Yet museum experience is also shaped by what is missing. Objects may have been destroyed, displaced, looted, removed for conservation, or excluded by institutional systems of classification. These forms of non-presence do not simply create empty space; they organize how visitors imagine history, loss, and cultural value.

This article uses the term *museological absence* to describe a relation in which an object, site, or historical trace becomes meaningful because it is missing from an expected location, community, or narrative. through its non-presence. The ruins of the Old Summer Palace, the dispersed manuscripts of the Dunhuang Library Cave, empty display cases left after loans, and replicas standing in for absent objects all show that absence can continue to act within the museum. In these cases, the missing object is not outside the exhibition; rather, it becomes part of the exhibition's narrative structure.

Existing scholarship has approached this problem from several directions. Bella Dicks argues that, as museums became more visitor-oriented in the mid-twentieth century, absent people and

communities could be mobilized as narrative voices through which history, nation, and society were made accessible to the public [1]. Joshua Parker's study of museological storytelling in Berlin similarly shows how architectural wounds, missing frescoes, and projected images can transform absence into a mode of historical narration [2].

Margaret Tali further treats absence as a central mechanism in contemporary art museums, connecting it to materiality, phenomenology, and discourse. For Tali, curatorial frameworks and archival logics do not merely present knowledge; they also determine which identities, memories, and artistic positions remain peripheral or invisible [3]. The Amsterdam Museum exhibition *In the Presence of Absence: Curating the Unseen, Ignored, and Forgotten* developed this issue in curatorial practice by bringing excluded histories, colonial memories, anti-racist works, and migrant experiences into public view [4].

These studies demonstrate that absence is not a marginal topic in museum studies. However, they often focus on how absence is represented rather than on how absence itself becomes a mode of museological presence. This article therefore shifts attention from the presentation of absence to presentation as absence: that is, from the form in which lack is displayed to the way lack itself produces visibility, memory, and reflection. The following sections distinguish four modes of absence in museums and examine how each mode reorganizes the relationship among objects, institutions, histories, and viewers.

2. Four modes of "absence" in museums

2.1. Institutional absence

The Stolen Past by Hrair Sarkissian, exhibited at the Raqqa Museum in northern Syria, used nineteenth-century photographic techniques and 3D printing to reconstruct ninety artifacts destroyed during the Syrian war. Based on photographs taken by local archaeological teams and residents, the work produced uncanny replicas of objects erased by violence. The dimly lit exhibition space, the blue light inside the display pillars, and the careful arrangement of the objects created a solemn atmosphere in which destruction became visible. The work asks how communities whose memories are marked by violence can confront the forced erasure of material heritage.

A related form of institutional absence appears in the participatory exhibition *Syrian Stories*, held at the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm from 2017 to 2018. Curated with Syrian immigrants and refugees in Sweden, the exhibition presented ordinary personal belongings such as keys, toys, letters, a hand-cream jar, a broken cello bow, and a doll. These objects did not simply illustrate catastrophe. They translated experiences of displacement into forms that could be seen, narrated, and publicly acknowledged.

For Foucault, discourse is "a practice that systematically forms the objects of which it speaks". So museum display, by the same logic, is never a neutral act of selection but is structured by systems of knowledge that determine what can become visible, legible, and authoritative [5].

Eighteenth-century export paintings produced in Guangzhou offer another example. These works functioned simultaneously as commodities, visual records, and cross-cultural translations for Western consumers [6]. Because export painters worked in commercial workshops and did not conform to the literati ideal of artistic authorship, their names and social conditions were often poorly documented. The porcelain-manufacturing paintings preserved at Lund University Library, for instance, reveal sophisticated visual techniques and valuable information about production and trade, yet the identity of the painter or workshop remains uncertain [7].

The Benin Bronzes expose the political stakes of this problem even more sharply. After the British punitive expedition against Benin City in 1897, thousands of objects entered European and North American museums. When these looted objects are framed simply as examples of world culture, their violent provenance can be depoliticized and the colonial aggression that made their display possible can be obscured [8]. Institutional absence therefore involves both what is missing from the museum and what is made invisible within the museum's own language of classification.

The examples above show that institutional absence is produced by classificatory systems, collecting histories, and political power, rather than the lack of objects. Museums risk depoliticizing these histories when they present displaced or looted objects without addressing violence, restitution, and repair. As Dan Hicks suggests, anthropology museums can become sites of conscience only when they confront the enduring presence of empire [8]. In this sense, the presentation of absent objects becomes a narrative of historical prejudice and an invitation to rethink the conditions under which cultural value is recognized.

2.2. Historical absence

Historical absence refers to the vacancies produced by disaster, violence, war, looting, and the passage of time. The National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York and the archaeological site of Pompeii are two distinct but comparable examples. The 9/11 Memorial uses the footprints of the Twin Towers, the descending pools, the sound of falling water, and the inscribed names of the dead to materialize lives and buildings that can no longer be restored. Pompeii, by contrast, preserves ruins, frescoes, streets, and plaster casts formed from the cavities left by bodies buried under volcanic ash. In both cases, absence is not concealed; it is made perceptible through site, trace, and atmosphere.

Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is useful here [9]. Restorative nostalgia seeks to rebuild a lost home or recover an imagined wholeness, whereas reflective nostalgia dwells on distance, longing, and the incompleteness of memory [9]. The 9/11 Memorial and Pompeii do not simply reconstruct the past as it was. They preserve voids, ruins, and traces, allowing visitors to remain aware of what cannot be fully recovered. Their power therefore lies less in restoration than in the reflective experience of loss.

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de memoire* further clarifies this process. Nora argues that sites of memory emerge when living memory must be anchored in material or symbolic forms [10]. Memory and history are not identical: history analyzes, orders, and explains, while memory remains affective, collective, and vulnerable to disappearance [10]. Historical absence in museums and sites therefore becomes a condition for memory. It does not reproduce a complete past; it preserves incompleteness so that the missing can continue to act on public consciousness.

The 9/11 Memorial transforms destroyed buildings and lost lives into a symbolic commemorative field, while Pompeii turns the absence of a vanished city into a materialized encounter with everyday life and sudden death. Both sites demonstrate that historical absence is not a failure of representation. Rather, it is a form of representation that makes loss intelligible without resolving it.

2.3. Curatorial absence

Curatorial absence, deliberately maintaining gaps, damage, or incompletions, operates within exhibition design. In 1990, thirteen artworks were stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, including Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and Vermeer's *The Concert*. The empty frames remain on display, marking both the former presence and the present absence of the

stolen works. At the Shanghai Museum of Glass, a pair of glass wings was intentionally broken in 2013; rather than being restored to its earlier state, the work was retitled from *Angel Waiting* to *Broken* and displayed in its damaged condition.

These cases do not use replicas or seamless restoration to compensate for loss. Instead, they allow the condition of having once been present, and now being absent or damaged, to affect the viewer. The Gardner Museum's empty frames, the damaged glass wings, and other visible gaps in exhibition practice emphasize the irreplaceability of the original object.

The Tianshui Museum's exhibition on ceramic conservation offers a different version of this problem. Some ceramic fragments could not be reassembled into complete vessels. Conservators therefore used transparent materials and digitally reconstructed patterns to distinguish surviving fragments from contemporary additions. The transparent additions do not conceal loss; they mark the boundary between original material and modern intervention. Debates over restoration often turn on precisely this question: whether intervention should produce visual unity or preserve the legibility of damage and historical discontinuity [11].

Walter Benjamin's concept of the artwork's aura helps explain why such absences matter. For Benjamin, the aura of a work is tied to its singular existence in a particular time and place. Reproduction can extend the image of an object, but it cannot reproduce the full historical presence of the original [12]. The empty frames at the Gardner Museum, the damaged work at the Shanghai Museum of Glass, and the visibly restored ceramics at Tianshui all turn non-presence into a perceptible state of presence. Rather than erasing loss, curatorial absence allows viewers to perceive authenticity through the very marks of absence.

2.4. Mobility absence

Mobility absence results from the temporary non-presence produced by loans, conservation, transport, or exhibition rotation. Visitors often encounter empty mounts, labels, photographs, or replicas when objects have been removed from their usual display spaces. For example, when bronzes from the Jiangxi Provincial Museum were lent to the National Museum of China, images and notices remained in their original cases. At the Louvre, the loan of the Roman marble *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* left the statue's base and description visible. In other cases, life-size replicas, such as the silicone-rubber reproduction of the Yachou Yue at the Shandong Museum, maintain the object's visual and narrative place in the gallery.

Although the object itself is absent, photographs, labels, replicas, and empty supports continue to activate the visitor's memory and movement. Bergson's account of memory distinguishes between memory-images, which preserve events and details, and motor memory, which organizes action and habit [13]. When visitors approach an empty case, read a label, compare a replica with the absent original, or imagine the object's temporary location elsewhere, the exhibition continues to operate through both kinds of memory. Mobility absence is therefore not a pure vacancy; it maintains the continuity of the display through substitute signs and visitor action.

This form of absence also reflects the museum's shift from a closed repository to an open and circulating institution. Tony Bennett describes museums as exhibitionary rather than merely enclosed spaces: their authority depends on public display and on the organization of visibility [14]. Loans transform absence in one museum into presence elsewhere, redistributing access across institutions, regions, and publics. The labels, photographs, and replicas left behind preserve the local narrative of the gallery while acknowledging the object's participation in a wider network of circulation.

3. Conclusion: the narrative of "absence" as presence

This article has argued that absence in museums is not a passive lack but an active mode of producing visibility, memory, and value. Institutional absence reveals how discourse, classification, and political power shape what museums can show. Historical absence transforms loss into commemorative memory through ruins, names, traces, and sites. Curatorial absence preserves gaps, damage, and incompleteness as part of the viewer's encounter with authenticity. Mobility absence shows how loans, conservation, and circulation generate temporary vacancies that are filled by labels, replicas, images, and visitor movement.

Ranciere's discussion of art and politics helps bring these forms together. In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, he examines positions that either separate art from politics or ask art to repair social relations through modest rearrangements of objects and situations. For Lyotard, modern art bears witness to the unrepresentable by exposing the gap between idea and sensible form [15]. Other practices create relational situations that mend or reconfigure social experience [15]. Ranciere's own concept of the distribution of the sensible emphasizes how spaces, times, visibilities, and voices are apportioned and rearranged [15].

Museum absence participates in this distribution of the sensible. It determines what can be seen, mourned, narrated, restored, or left unresolved. When visitors encounter ruins, empty frames, missing objects, or substitute images, they are invited to ask what once existed, why it disappeared, and who has the authority to narrate that disappearance. Absence thus shifts visitors from passive observation to active interpretation, where personal imagination intersects with collective memory. Regardless of its form, absence can produce a mode of presence. By opening a space for mourning, critique, and historical imagination, museum absence turns the blank into a narrative force.

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