5 Improving Transparency

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Abstract

Transparency is a crucial aspect of museums that nowadays are expected to be institutions of social trust and social justice. It concerns collections, whose provenances are more often than ever subjected to detailed examinations and whose published results increasingly have consequences, like planned restitutions. But it is also a much wider set of problems caused by museum practices related to colonial pasts that are not closed and often affect the present. One of them is authorship, understood in a wide sense as the privilege of presenting one's own point of view. Transparency also concerns museum policies, such as hiring, acquisition, management, and funding.

Keywords: ethics, provenance, restitution, inventories, exploitation, hiring policies

Transparency requires openness and a willingness to tell more than simple stories; it is sharing contestations and debates.

The challenge

In contemporary discussions about museums and their colonial pasts, transparency is mostly applied to the histories of collections. Museums are expected to reveal how items came to be stored in their collections and to speak out about bad acquisition practices.¹ Furthermore, their audiences and stakeholders increasingly demand clear statements about past practices, as well as possible futures for colonial artefacts, not only those that were looted, but also those purchased and acquired in situations of power imbalances

¹ ICOM 2017: 9, 29, 33.

between the parties of such transactions. According to Alice Procter, who runs the *Uncomfortable Art Tours* in British museums that focus on the disputed provenance of certain exhibited objects, practices of imperial collecting were connected with the deep mechanisms of colonialism. She undermines the general, historical concept of the museum by calling it “a colonialist, imperialist fantasy, born from the fallacy that somehow the whole world can be neatly catalogued, contained in a single building, mapped out for easy digestion.”²

The hidden practices underpinning the circulation of objects with dubious or disputed provenance have become the primary focus of today’s debate on the history of museum collections, even more so since the publication of the so-called Sarr and Savoy report. Officially titled *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*,³ this report, which was commissioned by the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, and written by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, calls for the restitution of artefacts looted in the colonial era. But it also briefly describes the history of African cultural heritage within the context of European colonization, thus revealing the scale of the problem. According to the report, approximately 90% of all collected cultural heritage artefacts from sub-Saharan Africa are held in Western collections. Therefore, despite the controversy and critical opinions formulated from varied viewpoints contained within the report, its call for transparency and the necessity to publish knowledge about the history of collections and the provenance of particular objects is unlikely to be challenged.

However, transparency can also be understood more broadly as being open about colonial pasts and the current museum practices that continue to be affected by them. Among the most important aspects are: authorship (of exhibitions or texts), decision-making processes (relating to the museum program and hiring policy), and the power relations within the institution (including funding dependencies). These issues have been addressed over the last few years by museum professionals as well as social activists. In her 2016 TedX talk, Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, President and CEO of the *Abbe Museum* in Maine, urged museum authorities to ensure that people from formerly colonized countries regained their voice and power.⁴ The same year, *Museum Detox* was established, a “network for people of color who work in museums, galleries, libraries, archives, and the heritage sector.”⁵

2 Procter 2019.

3 Sarr and Savoy 2018.

4 Catlin-Legutko 2016.

5 As quoted from the *Museum Detox* website. Available at <https://www.museumdetox.org/museumdetox-about-us> (accessed 1 April 2021).

Led by Sara Wajid, Head of Engagement at the *Museum of London*, this network propagates the importance of diversity in cultural institutions, but also helps members to achieve leadership positions and “creatively use radical approaches to dismantle unjust infrastructures in our national cultural institutions.”⁶

The debate was reignited two years later, when the *Brooklyn Museum* hired a white scholar as Consulting Curator of African Art. The problem of accessibility to museum positions for people of color was connected to the problem of the collection’s provenance. A New York-based activist group called *Decolonize This Place* published an open letter in which they called the decision “tone deaf,” and demanded the museum take part in the creation of a Decolonization Commission that would aim to diversify the museum’s staff and review its inventory of colonial-era artefacts “with a view to settling the long-pursued claims of reparations and repatriation.”⁷

The change

Undertaking provenance research and sharing knowledge about object biographies is a fundamental task for any decolonizing museum activity that involves the collections. In 2019, three British museums took action to confront the colonial legacy of their objects and increase transparency in this regard. The *British Museum*, *Victoria and Albert Museum*, and the *Pitt Rivers Museum* are reviewing the labels on thousands of artefacts, especially those that were plundered during the colonial era. In 2017, the *Victoria and Albert Museum* appointed its first provenance curator to coordinate research in this field, while the *Pitt Rivers Museum* at Oxford University hired a research associate for the Labelling Matters project to define how the museum should proceed with reviewing the historical labels in its galleries. At the same time, serious doubts remain over whether such relabeling processes are capable of clarifying the complexity of object trajectories in every case, as many objects have complicated biographies that often involve plundering, transportation between countries, sales, exchanges, or even abandonment.

Therefore, many museums, much like the *Victoria and Albert* or the *Tropenmuseum*, rather than undertaking these relabeling projects in isolation, are approaching them within the broader context of programs that lead to

6 As quoted from the *Museum Detox* website. Available at <http://museumdetox.com/#team-5> (accessed 1 November 2020).

7 Decolonize This Place 2018.

the recontextualization of the histories of objects and collections. However, another option for sharing complex and wide-ranging information is the innovative use of online databases. The Sarr and Savoy report postulates the publication of digitized information and research on the collections of colonial artefacts that would facilitate the process of making this knowledge available worldwide on the internet.⁸ Creating a digital archive of museum objects that includes information on their provenance can be an effective way to promote provenance research and transparency. And there are a number of major initiatives in this vein, including the Project for the Study of Collecting and Provenance being carried out by the Getty Research Institute, which makes use of the Getty Provenance Index Databases, containing 1.7 million records taken from the source material. A similar initiative, though much smaller in scale, is the Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal Project, a searchable registry of objects in US museum collections that changed ownership in Continental Europe between 1933-1945.

The call for transparency in museums is furthermore not only addressed to the management of objects in collections, but to people. There is an urgent need for cultural institutions to make long-term commitments to ethical and inclusive hiring policies, including at the executive leadership level, making museums more accessible to different social, ethnic, or economic groups and implementing a zero-tolerance policy towards racism, whether from staff or visitors. These postulates have been introduced since the turn of the century, and sometimes even earlier, by movements and activists' groups such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, the Art Workers Coalition, and the Women Artists in Revolution. The Art+Museum Transparency collective provides examples of institutions that have made clear statements of intent, with a particular focus on those that have already started to follow these up with concrete actions. For example, the *Walker Art Center*, or the *Vera List Center*, which have drawn a direct analogy between racial justice and labor justice within the structures of cultural organizations.

International Inventories Program | National Museum Nairobi & Goethe-Institut Kenya | Nairobi, Kenya

The International Inventories Program (IIP) is an initiative launched by the *National Museum Nairobi* and the *Goethe-Institut Kenya* in 2019. Its main aim is to create a comprehensive inventory of Kenyan cultural heritage in public institutions worldwide, in effect an international research and

8 Sarr and Savoy 2018.

Figure 5.1 Screenshot of the home page of the International Inventories Program, 2021

database project that investigates a corpus of Kenyan objects held in cultural institutions across the globe. IIP is a collaboration between: the *National Museums of Kenya* (NMK), the *Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum* in Cologne, the *Weltkulturen Museum* in Frankfurt, the SHIFT Collective in France and Germany, and the Nest Collective in Kenya. Other important goals are to create relationships of exchange and to strengthen the collaboration between NMK and key cultural institutions and collectors who possess and have custody of Kenyan objects by exchanging knowledge and information enabling these objects to be correctly identified, labeled, stored, and displayed.

Nanette Snoep, director of the aforementioned *Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum*, has stated that “there is a revolution happening in Germany’s museums.”⁹ Germany is under pressure, as neighboring countries such as the UK, the Netherlands, and France have already begun digitizing their collections and making them and their associated information available online. Consequently, at the beginning of 2019, the German government announced that over €2 million in state funds had been reserved for researching artefacts that had entered Germany’s museum collections during the colonial era. This announcement, which was made by the German Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, follows an appeal by over 80 scholars working in the fields of art history, ethnology, and history, who urged the German government to found an institute that would develop policies, research, and initiatives to address the nation’s colonial past as well as the provenance of colonial objects in public collections. The funds are administered by the German Lost Art Foundation, which was founded by the German federal government in 2015 in an effort to assist with the restoration of Nazi-looted artworks after the Second World War.

However, conducting research and creating collection databases is a time consuming and costly task. Therefore, strategic interventions like the *Appeal*

9 Oelze 2019.

To Open German Museums' Inventories On African Objects might be a more productive way of gaining access to the required information. In the autumn of 2019, a group of internationally acclaimed anthropologists, archaeologists, artists, art historians, historians, jurists, philosophers, political scientists, writers, and other scholars signed a petition requesting that the German authorities open up the inventories and archives relating to African objects they have in their museums and other institutions. They argue that:

Transparency does not require tedious data processing and completed digitalization projects, as often claimed. Work on the inventories will never be complete and will always remain work in progress. There is no need to wait. For this reason, we demand that public museums and their supervisory authorities, municipalities, federal states and the federal government make the inventories of African objects in their respective collections available worldwide as quickly as possible, regardless of the degree of completeness or supposed perfection of these inventories. Simple scans and lists are sufficient. We need them now. Only then can the dialogue begin.¹⁰

The Past Is Now | Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery | Birmingham, UK

In 2017, a group of six co-curators was invited to create an exhibition at the *Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery* (BMAG) that would use the museum's collections to expose history in new and challenging ways, while also increasing awareness of how colonial processes impact our present times. To make the project even more inclusive, the museum authorities appointed only women of color with different heritage backgrounds: Abeera Kamran (graphic designer), Aliyah Hasinah (poet and activist), Mariam Khan (writer), Sara Myers (cultural activist), Shaheen Kasmani (textile designer), and Sumaya Kassim (writer and researcher).

During preparations for the new exhibition, these co-curators were given presentations by the collections' curators about the acquisition histories of the museum's objects. Many of them had been donated by colonialists, merchants, or collectors. According to Sumaya Kassim,¹¹ one of the most famous and controversial objects is the Buddha Sakyamuni statue placed by the museum's entrance. It was 'discovered' in 1861 and

¹⁰ Opoku 2019.

¹¹ Kassim 2017.

Figure 5.2 Installation view of *The Past Is Now* exhibition

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2017; photo © Birmingham Museums Trust

transported from Northeast India by British railway engineer E. B. Harris, who then sold it for £200 to a West Midlands industrialist whose foundries had produced many of the rails and carriages for the East Indian Railway. This industrialist then donated it to the BMAG. What struck Kassim was the fact that the statue's origins and the circumstances of its acquisition were seen as secondary to the value of the access to 'history' it could potentially grant to the British public. Consequently, the team was tasked with tracing the histories of particular objects in order to reverse dominant perspectives.

The curators not only focused on exposing the provenance of objects, but also decided to present Birmingham's involvement in imperial and colonial politics. A separate section of the exhibition was devoted to Joseph Chamberlain, the celebrated 'father' of the city. His half-forgotten role as British Secretary of the Colonies was brought back into focus along with his strong belief in imperial expansion and the superiority of the 'British race.' This part of the exhibition exposed his imperialist, racist ideology and revealed that social reforms introduced in Birmingham had been at the expense of the colonies. Along with this fuller examination of Chamberlain's legacy, all the deep connections between Birmingham and the Empire that

are not often represented in the public spaces of the city were brought to light and explicitly linked to the museum's history.

The main focus of these curators' efforts, which might have corresponded to the expectations of the museum authorities, was to draw attention to the museum itself as an imperial structure that had failed to preserve history in a neutral manner because it had been governed by the old imperial rules. This issue is often illustrated with the classic Audre Lorde quote: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."¹² Inspired by this line of thinking, Sumaya Kassim decided to be open and transparent about the process of creating the exhibition. In her famous essay – and later video essay – *The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised*¹³ she raised some essential issues, like emotional labor, inadequate pay for work that had been undertaken, key decision-making taking place without the co-curators, and – one of the most difficult questions – the exploitation of people of color. In her words, "when projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to 'diversity,' 'inclusion' or 'decoloniality' we need to attend to these claims with a critical eye."¹⁴

Museum of British Colonialism | Kenya & UK

The *Museum of British Colonialism* (MBC) is a collective based both in Kenya and the United Kingdom and was created by women activists in 2018. Its main roles are to promote a more transparent and objective account of British colonialism and to construct an opposite perspective to the fantasy of a benevolent colonial power accepted by native peoples on whom it mostly bestowed benefits. The activists involved in this collective encourage the public to undertake the uncomfortable but necessary process of confronting Britain's colonial past and slavery. For the past two years, they have been conducting research using different methods: gathering oral histories, making films, carrying out archaeological fieldwork, and creating digital exhibitions about Britain's colonialism. Another task was to envision possible ways of working with this difficult and challenging heritage.

The very first project implemented by the MBC focuses on documenting sites and experiences relating to the Mau Mau Emergency in Kenya (1952-1960), one of the most brutal conflicts that Britain fought to retain what

¹² Lorde 1984: 110.

¹³ Kassim 2017.

¹⁴ Kassim 2017.

Figure 5.3 Screenshot of the webpage for the exhibition *Emergency*

Museum of British Colonialism, 2021

remained of its Empire after the Second World War. It is also one of the least known episodes in British colonial history. Undocumented and relatively untold, the museum faced the problem of how to maintain transparency when writing this history while contending with the absence of sources caused by the burning or concealing of British archives. Therefore, a team of volunteers researched and visited a number of sites formerly used to detain and torture thousands of Kenyans. They collected a wealth of documentation, including oral testimonies from former detainees and contemporary and archival images.

For the MBC activists, transparency must also be applied to authorship. But the question of who should tell the story begs the further question of who has the right to do so. “The story of British colonialism belongs to its victims and those who fought for freedom. It belongs to their descendants, in nations that Britain robbed and actively impoverished – from India and Kenya to Nigeria and Jamaica,”¹⁵ says Gabriel Moshenska, Associate Professor in Public Archaeology at UCL and a member of the MBC team. It follows

15 Moshenska 2020.

that telling the story right requires a new institution that would represent such marginalized and unheard voices. The members of the collective do not believe in the original concept of the museum institution because its history from the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities to 19th-century imperial collections has been shaped or infected by colonialism. Transparency, for them, can be only achieved in the museum institution once it has been invented anew: “to build a Museum of British Colonialism we need to discard all of this heritage and imagine a museum without walls, curators, collections or gift shops.”¹⁶

So instead of gathering artefacts, the MBC has produced a number of media pieces including a podcast, documentary, short films, and a blog. The long-term plan is to create a collection of online resources accessible for further research and publication or exhibition projects. Physical, globally networked exhibitions are also being considered as a possibility, as the main goal is to build common awareness of past events and experiences in the colonial era. The MBC team envisions such a new museum institution in terms of collaborative, creative processes that lead to understanding and empathy within and between communities. Nevertheless, anyone following this path will need to uncompromisingly confront a difficult, sometimes shameful past.

Musée des Civilisations Noires | Dakar, Senegal

The *Musée des Civilisations Noires* (*Museum of Black Civilizations*; MCN) which opened on 6 December 2018, is a national museum in Dakar, Senegal, with a mission to propagate Africa’s overlooked contributions to the world’s cultural, scientific, and technologic patrimony. It is the realization of a dream of Léopold Sédar Senghor, post-independence Senegal’s first president, to create a museum that would represent the histories and contemporary cultures of black people across the globe.¹⁷ His vision for the museum is entirely in the spirit of the Pan-Africanist movement.¹⁸ For centuries, African histories have been told by others and their art and material heritage were taken by and kept in Western museums. Therefore, the new institution has two main goals: to tell the history of Africa and its diaspora from an African perspective and to provide a repository for African art and heritage in Africa. Thus, the ambition of this new pan-African institution is to change the

16 Moshenska 2020.

17 Kimeria 2019.

18 For more about Pan-Africanism, see *Liberty Hall: The Legacy of Marcus Garvey* in Chapter 2.

dominant narrative and to play an active role in the restitution of artefacts plundered during the colonial era.

The MCN's displays span many centuries and continents and are divided into thematic sections to present both the histories and contemporary cultures of black people in a global context. The exhibitions are not intended to be permanent, but rather to rotate frequently to reflect the dynamics of civilizations.¹⁹ Their topics are illustrated with artefacts including early stone tools and masks. However, contemporary artworks are equally important in these narratives, such as works by Cuban Elio Rodriguez, South African Andries Botha, or Haitian Philippe Dodard. Exhibition curators have included them to emphasize how African history and culture continuously thrive and to showcase that the MCN does not only look back to the past. The museum includes both tangible and intangible heritages to actively engage in the process of shaping Africans' sense of identity in the present.

The MCN was opened a year after President of France Emmanuel Macron declared on his Twitter account that "African heritage can no longer remain a prisoner of European museums."²⁰ As such, the institution was perceived as an important step forward in the efforts to reclaim African artefacts looted during colonial times. The colossal, modern building has space for 18,000 objects and many of the galleries are not yet filled. Other galleries display objects on loan from European museums, such as the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris or the *Royal Museum for Central Africa* in Tervuren. Senegal has formally requested repatriations from French collections and there is some hope to regain some of those objects. The very first request, and a symbolic one, is a sword originally belonging to Omar Saidou Tall, an Islamic scholar and West African ruler who led an anti-colonial siege against the French in the 1850s.²¹

MCN Director Hamady Bocoum emphasizes that although restitution is important, it is not their main priority because African history should not be reduced to the relatively brief period of colonization: "if the timeline of African humanity were just one day, he said, colonization and slavery 'were just one minute.'"²² Instead the MCN pursues a broader mission to cover 7 million years of African civilizations in a global context. Yet, by providing physical space for repatriated objects and by vocally advocating for the

19 Stoudmann 2020.

20 Macron 2017 (in French, our translation).

21 Stoudmann 2020.

22 Searcey and Nayeri 2019.

restitution of African material heritage, the MCN plays an important role in this global debate. On the one hand, the existence of the museum counters an oft-heard excuse for not arranging object repatriation, namely that objects are 'better cared for' in their current European storages. On the other hand, the ongoing active requests for object repatriations, as well as the efforts to legally regain items currently on loan, push European museums to research their collections, engage in uncovering object biographies, and clarify object provenances. Thus, the work of the *Musée des Civilisations Noires* effectively results in other museum institutions improving their transparency when it comes to their colonially obtained objects.

We would be remiss if we did not reflect on the funding of the MCN. The creation of the museum was possible due to a major investment by the Chinese government of \$34 million,²³ and the design is by Chinese state architects. China has been investing heavily in the African continent, for instance in infrastructure, and has also engaged in providing funding for cultural projects and institutions in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Chinese investments are mainly intended to increase trade and access to African raw materials, but there is also a political dimension to China's interest in Africa. Financially, a number of these Chinese investments have resulted in debt and some have called these debt traps a new form of colonialism – although others have countered that this underestimates the decision-making powers of African governments.²⁴ In the cultural sphere, however, Chinese involvements abroad can be intended to influence aspects such as sense of identity, perspectives on history, and systems of knowledge.²⁵ In the case of the MCN, they have been transparent about their Chinese funding and have said that their operations will be independent.²⁶ Nonetheless, this could become a source of conflict in the future if the independence of the museum were to be restricted.

Further reading

Dossiê "Patrimônio Indígena e Coleções Etnográficas" | edited by Jimena

Felipe Beltrão | 2017

Exclusive Labels | Pauline Turner Strong | 1997

²³ Searcey and Nayeri 2019.

²⁴ Were 2018.

²⁵ Pozzi Forthcoming.

²⁶ Katz 2018.

Further examples

Black Models: From Géricault to Matisse exhibition at the *Musée d'Orsay* Paris, France (March-July 2019)

“Taking a multi-disciplinary approach that combines the history of art and the history of ideas, this exhibition explores aesthetic, political, social and racial issues as well as the imagery unveiled by the representation of black figures in visual arts, from the abolition of slavery in France (1794) to the modern day.”²⁷

“Object labels that indicate how titles have changed over the years help audiences to understand the vagaries of naming and point to their political implications. For instance, the label for Eugène Delacroix’s *Portrait d’une femme au turban bleu* (Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Turban) (1827-28) states that it was formerly known as *Tête d’étude d’une Indienne* (Study of the Head of an Indian Woman), *Une tête de femme mulâtre* (A Mulatto Woman’s Head), and *Aline la Mulâtresse* (Aline the Mulattress). These shifts demonstrate the mutability of the idea of race in general and of the woman of color in particular, who could transform from an Indian to a ‘mulâtresse,’ to a named individual, and eventually back to an anonymous woman in a blue turban.”²⁸

Dead Images exhibition at the *Edinburgh College of Art* Edinburgh, UK (2018)

“Part of the TRACES project, DEAD IMAGES is an artistic exploration of the complex and contentious legacy of collections of human skulls held by public institutions in Europe. [...] We live with this legacy. It resides in our cities. Often it is hidden but it is still with us. The DEAD IMAGES exhibition [...] brings this legacy to light by exhibiting a life-sized 30 meter photograph of part of one such collection, a gathering of more than 8,000 skulls which resides on shelves along a corridor in the Natural History Museum of Vienna. In exhibiting this photograph, this exhibition asks questions of ourselves, our ambivalent curiosity and our own desire to see that which is withheld. [...] We explore these questions through a series of filmed works, in which different people speak to this history, their own beliefs and feelings and whether or not we should display this

27 As quoted from the *Musée d'Orsay* website. Available at <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/archives/archives/browse/2/article/le-modele-noir-47692.html> (accessed 1 April 2021).

28 Childs 2019.

photograph. The choice to see the photograph, finally, rests with the visitor and in making a choice visitors are asked to reflect upon this history, the work of bringing this history to light, the ethics and politics of making such a display visible and the role that descendants, curators, scientists, artists and the public may play in reimagining a place and purpose for these remains of once-living people.”²⁹

With our thanks for this suggestion to Anna Szöke.

The India Museum Revisited project by the *Victoria and Albert Museum* London, UK (since 2019)

“In a post-colonial era, the East India Company’s museum has attracted commentators who have attributed to it motives unsupported by surviving archival and physical evidence. A new survey will establish an objective basis for future analysis. At the dispersal of the India Museum in 1880, most of the objects came to the South Kensington (V&A) Museum, where they were listed. Addressing that and an earlier register, subsequent publications, the V&A’s Collections Management System and the objects themselves, a consolidated account of the contents will be produced for the first time. The exhibits will be analysed, grouped according to their original function and their role within the museum; their sources will be charted and interrogated, and the intentions of the donors assessed.”³⁰

In a Different Light exhibition at the *Museum of Anthropology at UBC* Vancouver, Canada (2017-2021)

“*In a Different Light* presents more than 110 historical Indigenous artworks and marks the return of many important works to British Columbia. These objects are amazing artistic achievements. Yet they also transcend the idea of ‘art’ or ‘artifact.’ Through the voices of contemporary First Nations artists and community members, this exhibition reflects on the roles historical artworks have today. Featuring immersive storytelling and innovative design, it explores what we can learn from these works and how they relate to Indigenous peoples’ relationships to their lands. With the increasing impacts of colonization in the 19th century, many Northwest Coast objects were removed from their communities. As they circulated through museums and private collections, their histories were often lost. Indigenous community members are now reconnecting with

29 As quoted from the *Dead Images* brochure.

30 As quoted from the *Victoria and Albert Museum* website. Available at <https://www.vam.ac.uk/research/projects/the-india-museum-revisited> (accessed 1 April 2021).

these objects and rebuilding their past. Through their eyes, you will come to see these artworks in a different light – as teachers, belongings, even legal documents.”³¹

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31 As quoted from the *Museum of Anthropology at UBC* website. Available at <https://moa.ubc.ca/exhibition/in-a-different-light-reflecting-on-northwest-coast-art/> (accessed 1 April 2021).

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