

Decolonizing a Colonizer's Tool

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In order to discuss the decolonization of museology, we must understand what comes with these two words. Museology is the science or practice of organizing, arranging, and managing museums. And what are museums? Currently, the International Council of Museums' official definition states that a museum is a "non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment". However, this definition can change – and it already has. By focusing on the social history of museums, I wish to uncover the changing roles of the institution and the issues hindering the process of decolonization.

Firstly, to properly grasp the meaning of decolonization, we need to acknowledge how colonization is still present in modern society. When the colonizers plundered everything they could, the colonies were forced to endure all the pain to prevent further attacks. Consequently, these two societies became unquestionably entangled. This can be most notably identified within the social realm of former colonies' everyday life, such as the dominant language spoken.

Nonetheless, museologists usually look at these societies as two different and separate ones instead of two different ones with a common past, which translates itself in the present as an intrinsic bind between two countries. It is unfair to treat those countries as the colonizers are treated since they never became fully postcolonial because the colonizers never left their countries to create themselves organically. There are countries younger than fifty years old (e.g. Angola (independent since 1975), Djibouti (independent since 1977), and Micronesia (independent since 1986)). Moreover, the smaller societies (indigenous or religious) inside a country are also not respected as their own because they are seen as a figment of others.

As a result, the museal field continuously perpetuates the myth of a single homogeneous society within a given former colony, when they should be in fact, paving the way towards decolonization. But what exactly does this path entail and how is it possible for museums to put this into practice? In order to find the answers to these questions, it is necessary to address the roots of this issue: the creation of the first museums and the birth of a new field of study.

It is vital to understand the context behind the process of museum creation. Questions arise regarding how collections were acquired and consequently how they were and still are displayed, and how the wording of texts affects public perception. Where were these museums built, what was their purpose? The answers to these questions might be obvious to museologists, but how this relates to present-day museums and how to fix the problem is not obvious at all.

A museum is a place to try to engage in critical dialogues regarding the past and future of communities and nations, trying to understand their complex histories and learn from the mistakes made throughout their existence. History might be dark and ethically dubious at times, but all must engage with it, nevertheless. Undertaking such a process requires us to understand the root of the issues faced in the field of museum studies. It is at the beginning of the museum's history that the problem started, when the world was still largely under colonial rule, and collectors mostly acquired objects by questionable means.

Although objects were at times also bought by or gifted to colonial forces, they were most commonly simply claimed and taken. Even when pieces were legally acquired, the colonized participated out of fear, hoping to avoid further exploitation. Furthermore, it is important to talk about how these are then displayed in museums. Every part of the museography matters, but the one that influences the most on people's views on some object or some population is the expography. Even the words chosen to explain what an object is can be a consequence of colonization.

For instance, calling an object "primitive" instead of "ancient" or "old" can influence the public's perception of the object. The first term is usually used in a pejorative or derisive connotation, so the public will perceive the object and the people that used it as simple, unsophisticated and less worthy than Europeans. Whereas the second is usually said more neutrally, as it was necessary at some time but not anymore, thus making the public perceive it as an object that once was important but it stopped and became "classic" making it sound remarkable. Lastly, the third can be used in any way since it is a completely neutral term not really making an impact on perception, the rest of the text being the explanation needed and the public will have no pre-made concepts about an object based on a word.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the archaeologist Leonard Woolley discovered the oldest place to be considered a museum, the Enningaldi-Nanna's museum, built by a Babylonian princess in 530 BCE and devoted to Mesopotamian antiquities. The first modern museums were formed by the private collections of wealthy families, people, and institutions, among others. These so-called "wonder rooms" or "cabinets of curiosities", were found to display almost anything ranging from art and tools to entire specimens of exotic fauna and flora. Modern museums, however, started to appear in Europe in the late 15th to early 16th centuries and consisted mainly of European art. Furthermore, early museums, which preceded the term itself, consequently, museums and the field of studies created thereafter were born from and perpetuated a Eurocentric worldview.

When diving even further into the history of museums, it is possible to come to the conclusion about the purpose of early modern museums: testament of power. Being able to afford to go traveling or to buy art is and has always been something that most cannot do. Ergo, all to whom this was a possibility and ultimately displayed their collections were members of the upper class or connected to powerful institutions. The most powerful members of society, such as the nobility, were exclusively the ones who could afford to travel and bring back souvenirs to add to their collections and put them in museums. Consequently, when they described the musealia, they would inevitably describe it underestimating the people who used it.

Even though social history museums eventually became places to learn, study, and research cultures erstwhile unknown to Europeans, museology still is a very classist and Eurocentric field. This is slowly changing as the field starts to place more value upon local cultures. Museums in France to New Zealand and Brazil are paving the way towards decolonization. The process of decolonizing is hard and can be damaging to museums in Europe, but is a path that must be followed to correct the mistakes of the past and try to make amends with societies that were exploited. This process will depend on two factors, however: 1) the colonizer or colonized country 2) The reality of settlement and exploitation during colonization.

In different countries, different types of decolonization are necessary. What is common in all ways to decolonize the museum is the goal: start engaging in a critical dialogue about the past and future of the nations and communities involved. The easiest way to decolonize the museums is that the ex-colonizers should simply give back what has come to their hands through morally questionable actions. Nevertheless, that is not easy per se; it is only the most easily achievable goal. One action and most of the issues that are reminiscent of colonization are resolved. However, this is not a magical solution and it is also not new. All around the globe, for some time, the museal field have been discussing this. The biggest problems that were brought to light because of this debate are: 1) the museums in the countries that would receive the objects may not have the infrastructure to take care of them. 2) The museums that are returning the objects would lose a big part of their collections, causing a defective teaching potential.

For the first problem, the difficulty is that there is not one way to handle these cases. Every case must be treated as unique. Furthermore, it is usually a battle of egos: both sides judge themselves more fit than the other to have the object in question. Many factors must be taken into account, such as the importance of the object (for both the giver and receiver); the ability of the museum to take care of the object; the historical issue (determining which objects fit in the category of "must be returned"). This battle can be settled through legal action in court, in a meeting between the two museum directors or another way. The most used argument to defend that something should stay where they are is the fact that the Europeans museums usually deem third world country museums unfit. That can be true, but even when it is not, they do not want to let go of the

object because of its value to the museum. The solution should always be in favor of the object. When the museum is unable to perform all the preservation measures, they should not have the object.

The second problem will only appear after the first one is dealt with and quite easily solved. The giver can replicate the objects given – if the receiver agrees – not to damage the teaching potential for the museum. If the receiver does not agree that the giver can replicate the object, that has to be respected.

When talking about the museums in colonized countries, it is harder to decolonize, because the decolonization of their museums lies also in the decolonization of the colonizer museums. A better way to decolonize the museal field in colonized countries is to create museums or expositions that talk about colonization. Art curator and critic Robert Leonard (2006) believes that:

Social history museums aspire to tell stories. Which is odd, because they tell stories rather badly compared to books or movies, which can be gripping and immersive.

This is true up to a point in the former colonies because they lack material history that was stolen from them when they were colonized. The problem in most of the former colonies is that visiting museums is an uncommon habit because museums are seen as boring places meant for the elite. So not only decolonizing the museal field is needed, but also destigmatizing it in certain places. One clear example that only decolonization is not very effective is the Indigenous Museum in Rio de Janeiro, which closed due to a lack of visitors. On another note, good examples of functioning decolonization are the different exhibitions (e.g. *Slice of Heaven* and a community exhibition about the Scottish migrants) at the Te Papa Museum, in Wellington, New Zealand. The difference between the two countries that made something work on one side and not in the other is the past: New Zealand was a settlement colony while Brazil was an exploitation colony.

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