

Introduction

The Decolonization of Museology: Museums, Mixing, and Myths of Origin

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The concept of “property” is new to our history. It made no sense to us to think that we possessed things, the earth, the elements. We see ourselves as a part of the universe and not as a separate entity within it; we have no power over the other parts, except to negotiate our place and our relationships with them. No living being is superior to others, each one is essential right where it is. For example, we still believe that, despite its pretense, the government cannot own water, because water is like air, impossible to grasp. Air and water do not belong to us, just like wampum belts do not belong to their guardians; the latter’s mandate is to protect them and to pass them on.

Elisabeth Kaine, *Ce que nous sommes* (That Which We Are)

From: Elisabeth Kaine, Jean Tanguay, Jacques Kurtness, (2016) *Voix, Visages, Paysages. Les Premiers Peuples et le XXI^e siècle*, La boîte Rouge vif, 24, p.10.

Introduction

In a 2019 ICOFOM call for papers, we asked the following question: keeping in mind the new proposal for the definition of the museum that was presented in Kyoto, do museums really engage in a critical dialogue about the past and future of nations and communities? In other words, are museums truly embarking on a path towards decolonization, or do they still prop up myths of homogeneous societies? These are the initial questions that led ICOFOM to propose its 44th symposium, to be held in Canada from March 15-19, 2021. The call for proposals was sent out just as the COVID-19 pandemic was sweeping the planet, and borders closed at the same time as museums were forced to close their doors. Visitors, and especially tourists, had no choice but to return home. No one had imagined a crisis on this scale. Paradoxically, while many governments favored the maintenance of so-called essential services, museums, like theaters and cinemas, were deemed to be dangerous for the spread of the virus. However, the role of the museum is not exactly opposite of that of a lockdown.

The museum, as an institution, offers an opening to the world, a space for contemplation and reflection on culture. And yet, we have never needed museums as much as we do now to navigate an international crisis like the one that we are all currently living through. After all, don't museums promote the idea of living together?

Museums and decolonization

Living together implies certain responsibilities; as such, museums have committed to engaging in a reflection on their own responsibilities as they pertain to colonialism. The new museology movement has certainly contributed to this self-criticism of the social role of museums in regard to culture. The theme of decolonization has penetrated the thinking of the international museum community for several years now. Decolonization raises questions about the origin of a country and its own culture. This issue appears fundamental in the comprehensive exhibitions in national museums, which offer narratives that ascribe meaning to national myths of origin (Bouchard, 2014; Lévi-Strauss, 2001) that are also associated with myths about identity that contribute to the construction of collective identities. Thus, until the beginning of the twenty-first century, Canadian museums, in particular, offered a national history that began with the discovery of America by Europeans in the sixteenth century. This period of contact between the Old and New Worlds then became the point of departure for history and culture. However, are we able to ignore the fact that indigenous peoples from Asia roamed, occupied, and transformed North America for millennia before the European arrival? These various points of view are visible in Canadian national museums, but it took strong action by the First Nations peoples for national museums to become aware of their responsibilities in terms of decolonization, and for museum associations and governments to become involved in the emancipation process (Phillips, 2011; Clifford, 2013; Sleeper-Smith, 2009).

Contrary to origin myths in the Americas and elsewhere in the world, cultural history is made up of *métissages* (“mixes”¹) and hybridization (Turgeon, 2003), and is fundamentally opposed to the very idea of cultural homogeneity. Museums sometimes tend to oppose pure origins with the concept of the *allochtone*, a term that is used to designate that which is not native to a country. But the reality of museums is more complex than this binary opposition, and objects and stories at the heart of museums bear witness to the *métissage* of cultures. What are the museum’s responsibilities in connection to these questions of historical interpretation? In short, to which memories do museums bear witness? Hybridization, as much an ethical choice as an aesthetic one (Morin, 2016), favors the encounters between peoples and between cultures. It opens the way to a creative interculturality. If we recognize that museums are places of cultural diplomacy, how then can they participate in this hybridization?

More than ever, questions about the representation of cultural and indigenous communities in museums are a subject of debate. The same is true of the delicate question of returning works of art and collections to their communities of origin (Sarr and Savoy, 2018). There is good reason to wonder what place museums accord the culture of cultural communities and First Nations in national collections, as well as in comprehensive exhibitions devoted to major national narratives. However, how far should museums go in the decolonization and reparations process (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)? Does “a museum (...) open to the public and in the social arena, constantly reinventing itself, developing partnerships” (Eidelman, 2017, p. 88) do all this in consultation with partners from different cultural communities or the First Nations?

A recurring question

The decolonization of museums, as we have previously underlined, has found itself at the heart of discussions about the social function of the museum in the debates surrounding the proposed museum definition during the meeting of the International Council of Museums in Kyoto in 2019 (*Museum International*, vol. 71, no 281-282). It is worth remembering that this is not a new question, and it surfaces periodically in the world of museums, notably due to its links to the issue of returning works and objects to their communities of origin. As part of the geopolitical perspective of museology, decolonization is on the agenda of many national museum associations.

1. The French word *métissage* (and its adjective form, *métisse*), lacks an exact English translation. *Métissage*, translated in the title of the call for papers as “mixes,” can refer to mixing or intermixing of racial and ethnic groups, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, or a multiethnic, multicultural, and/or diverse society, depending on its context in a sentence. It can also refer to many of these concepts at once. To remind readers that the word can be translated in different ways, *métissage* has been left in French when it appeared in the original French version of the text. (Translator’s note.)

Thus, during the 25th ICOM Triennial Conference, a roundtable with simultaneous translation was devoted to the theme “*Decolonization and restitution: towards a more holistic perspective and a relational approach*,” with the objective to “trace and map new and different ways to see and think about these problems.” Representatives of ICOM’s National Committees from Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, and the United Kingdom explained how museums approach decolonization, where they see progress, and what challenges and obstacles they face. Participants stressed that the decolonization of museums raises important questions about ownership, control, and power. The discussion also focused on restitution and the approach taken by formerly colonized countries to address this issue. In a similar vein, ICOFOM has carried out a three-year research program that began in 2019 called “*Museums, community action and decolonization*.” What does decolonizing the museum mean in the twenty-first century? Are current debates truly helping to change local practices and actions? How can community engagement in museums promote decolonization? This research program is recognized by the Strategic Allocation Review Committee (SAREC), a permanent ICOM committee. It aims to promote international debate and develop theoretical tools via a new methodology that seeks to understand the demands of communities implicated in the actions of these debates.

While the most recent debates about decolonizing the museum have revolved around the practical and political implications of returning cultural property, not all museums question their authority over the treatment of colonial heritage in their collections in the same way. If the goal of decolonization is to add depth, breadth, and new knowledge to the canon, the discussion surrounding museum processes must account for the power structures that lie behind knowledge production. It must also consider the policies that engender the critical theory which provides a basis for decolonization. Interpreting the impacts of colonization is a fundamental challenge for institutions that give new life to representations of the past. New issues, such as climate change and growing social and economic inequality in all countries and regions, along with the persistence of racism, sexism and the reproduction of historical exclusions inside the museum, and the ways it exercises its authority over society, have illustrated, yet again, the need to review the practices and priorities of actions taken by museums. ICOFOM’s 2019-2022 international program aims to establish a global platform for dialogue between communities and museums. The primary objective of this program is to assess the decolonization of museums and to offer “decolonial” and “indigenous” views of the museum and cultural heritage by promoting community debates as part of the museological dialogue. ICOFOM and its partners will serve as the main platform for this global reflection.

The 44th ICOFOM Symposium, *The Decolonization of Museology: Museums, Mixing and Myths of Origin*, to be held in Montreal, Ottawa, and Quebec City in March 2021, is part of this research program. Several questions, found here, are on the agenda:

- What place do museums give to the culture of cultural communities and First Nations in national collections and in comprehensive exhibitions devoted to major national narratives? How far should museums go to decolonize?
- Does a museum “open to the public and in the social field, constantly reinventing itself, developing partnerships” do this by consulting with partners from different cultural communities or the First Nations, via partnerships and/or representation on museum boards, in order to make decisions regarding exhibitions that concern the partners?
- Do museums engage in critical dialogue about the past and future of nations and communities?
- Do museums envision a path towards decolonization, or do they still maintain myths of homogeneous societies?
- What are the responsibilities of museums regarding these major international trends?
- For too long, the moment of contact between the Old and New Worlds has served as a point of departure for history and culture. Do people of the First Nations need to take strong action for national museums to show awareness about their responsibilities for decolonization, and for museum associations and governments to involve themselves in the process?
- What are the responsibilities of museums regarding these questions about how to interpret history?
- What memories do museums bear witness to?
- Can museums ignore the fact that indigenous peoples from Asia roamed, occupied, and transformed North America for millennia before the arrival of Europeans?
- Hybridization, which favors the encounter between peoples and between cultures, opens the way to creative interculturality. How can museums, places of cultural diplomacy, participate in this hybridization?
- How and to what extent do national museums recognize cultural communities and indigenous cultures?
- How should museums interpret the contribution of various cultural communities to a national culture?
- Should museums respond to the demands of the First Nations and cultural communities by giving them back the objects of which they are stakeholders?

A rich and diverse program

Some 43 papers were selected for the symposium *The Decolonization of Museology: Museums, Mixing and Myths of Origin*. Synopses of these papers can be found in this publication. Although these papers cannot answer all of the questions asked above, it is interesting to note that they also generate new questions. Their aim is to deepen reflection and sometimes even to provoke debate. They enrich ICOFOM's thinking.

The authors and the subjects they address take us on a tour around the world: to Africa, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Oceania, Asia, Europe, North and South America, be they reflections on art museums, musées de société, ethnographic museums, or remarks on the very foundations of the decolonization of museology. The material is rich and the papers provide fascinating reads.

Some of the ideas discussed and questions asked in the papers include: recognizing and protecting the cultures of all parts of society, and suggestions for a critical reading and review of museography. But within the museum just how far should the participation and inclusion of all the groups that make up society go? Reimagining museums? Rather than focus on the idea of decolonizing (which can have the negative connotation de-colonizing) should we not substitute this with the idea of belonging, and instead, imagine instead of cultural heritage as relational? What about speaking of "autochthonization," or indigenization? By doing so, museums become contact zones; they upset and destabilize conventional gains. Museums put the principles of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion at the forefront, and sometimes in difficult contexts. Perhaps museums need to rethink the notion of heritage to better accommodate the pasts of immigrant communities in museums. Museums are enriched by the thoughts of First Peoples, for whom a relationship to objects can be something quite different. The repatriation of cultural and sacred objects from these Peoples is often discussed, sometimes in the light of the law, much like discussions about returning cultural objects held by large museums: who is responsible for protecting the Parthenon friezes? Should not the decolonization of museology focus more on studying current structures of dominant power, such as language or the dissemination of research, rather than colonial power structures?

While most of the proposals concentrate on decolonizing museums, a few contributors chose to study the decolonization of the discipline of museology. François Mairesse approaches this delicate question by first referencing the position of Hugues de Varine in remarks made in 2005, as well as the work of Teresa Scheiner (2017) and Bruno Brulon Soares and Anna Leshchenko (2018). Mairesse recalls criticism levied at French museology, which has been accused of appropriating theory from outside European frameworks. The author also invokes the question of the dominant linguistic spaces, "which are French and English[,] and the openness to other spaces, such as Brazilian or Chinese, which have considerable amounts of museological literature, in order to better reflect the diversity of the global museum system – for example, the way of conceiving

the museum.” As Mairesse points out, we should not forget that academic literature, though it aims to be international, is nonetheless primarily aimed at a local audience. However, one cannot deny the fact that the *lingua franca* is still currently English, and that it is imperative to write in this language to disseminate research. Addressing this delicate question requires thinking about the recognition and notoriety spread by citing and disseminating publications. As such, the members of ICOFOM have a crucial responsibility, because, through their work and their teaching, are they not responsible for drawing attention to the diversity of viewpoints being expressed?

Examining the conference proposals, it is clear that the question of the place of the First Nations has attracted the attention of the research community. The discussions will focus primarily on the various issues associated with the responsibilities of museums with regard to this topic. However, they will not fully shed light on the place of cultural communities in the great collective narratives proposed by national museums. It would certainly be useful to revisit this theme at a future ICOFOM symposium.

At the time of writing in late October 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic continued to swiftly rage around the world, it was difficult to imagine what format these debates would take. But it is certain that they will lead us to better understand the mission of museums in the twenty-first century and to better understand the New museology movement, which began nearly fifty years ago and has ended up rising to the top of the various subcommittees of the International Council of Museums questioning museological dogma.

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