

Museological Myths of Decolonization and Neutrality

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"To have no museum in today's circumstances is to admit that one is below the minimum level of civilisation required of a modern state"

(Hudson & Nicholls, 1985)

Museums are some of the most trusted public institutions in many countries. Museum as institution is the "cultural product of western history" (Wu, 2006, p. 6) that enforces the nation-state creed. Consequently, imperial ideology and colonial practices have been naturalized in present-day museums, continuing to preserve and (re)construct cultural, social, political, economic, and aesthetic hierarchies.

Museums absorbed diverse subject matter disciplines, such as anthropology and ethnology, further solidifying their discriminatory hierarchies, notably representing 'we' (as positive) and 'others' (as negative) and the imagined genetic superiority of the European white race. The same applied to art history, which favors Western aesthetics and universalizes its dominance. Have those perspectives changed today? If so, why do some cultural objects end up in an art museum and others in ethnological, anthropological, and natural history museums? Why are these museums separated in the first place? Who decides what is fine art and what is not? Who creates the value of the cultural objects?

Museums today still represent global inequality of economic power, sustaining the unending colonizers and colonized relations. This relation is particularly visible in the current issue of restitution of cultural materials.¹ This paper addresses the colonial origin of the museum and examines the questions "what is it really to decolonize the museum?" and "were museums ever neutral?" We will also introduce briefly two case studies: an experimental exhibition *Art of the Americas* (2018)² and another exhibition, opening in 2021, which will be expanding the theme of *Art of the Americas* to the global scale.

1. For example, the return of Benin Bronzes, the repatriations of human remains in different contexts in the museum world, Sarr & Savoy's report (<http://restitutionreport2018.com>) etc.

2. The exhibition aimed to engage the 'decolonizing museum' movement, deconstructing the museum

Heritage, Nation, and Coloniality of Knowledge

Museums are “part of the heritage of cultural colonialism” (Wu, 2006, p. 2) — but they also were the tools of colonialism itself. The modern museum was formed at the turn of the 19th century, and, as many scholars point out, it served as a mechanism to exercise new forms of governmentality (cf. Bennett, 1995). The nineteenth-century museums embodied the self-serving Enlightenment concept and used its symbolic power to civilize and reorganize people by introducing specific practices into the emerging public sphere. Coinciding with the emergence of nation-states, national museums, especially museums of cultural history, were responsible for creating the feeling of belonging to “imagined communities” (Anderson, 2006). Staging a national history in the museum simplified the complexity and ambiguity of the nation’s past and reduced the production of knowledge to one hegemonic narrative. Coombes (1988) pointed out that colonial exhibitions in the 19th century were constructing colonized subjects, reproducing them “in a ‘safe’, contained and yet accessible and supposedly open environment” (p. 59). This practice has been adopted and naturalized universally even to the present day, preserving the West-monopolized idea of high and ‘civilized’ (as well as ‘civilizing’) culture.

Museums both deal with different sorts of heritage and also *are* heritage-making institutions themselves. Smith (2006) argued that heritage is a performative “cultural practice, involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and understandings” (p. 11). She posited a ‘hegemonic discourse’ manipulating how we interpret heritage, which “promoted a certain set of Western elite cultural values as being universally applicable” and that “undermines alternative and subaltern ideas about ‘heritage’” (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, the separation of tangible and intangible heritage also creates the division in class, race, ethnicity, gender, and aesthetics favoring Western elite material culture as *the* heritage over (often Non-Western) cultural and social practices.

These unspoken hierarchies contribute to the idea of the museum as a depository of material culture. The very materiality of museum objects leads to another concept - one of the ‘objectivity’ of knowledge produced by this institution and its neutral/scientific nature, whereas oral history/storytelling, chanting/singing, dancing, and ritual were considered as not belonging to Western cultural values (for example, on the global level, from the very first museum definition by ICOM, heritage was codified as “material evidence,” and only in 2007 was the notion of “tangible and intangible heritage” introduced³). Also, the very vocabulary includes a catch here: “to designate embodied knowledge and practices ‘intangible’ is to define them by what they are *not* and to maintain the primacy of tangibility as an organizing concept in heritage theory and practice” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2017, p. 75).

and its naturalized/universalized imperial ideology and colonial practice.

3. http://archives.icom.museum/hist_def_eng.html

This power disbalance was addressed recently both by activists and academic researchers, leading to the calls for decolonizing museums.

What does it mean to decolonize the still-colonial institution?

Given the aforementioned critique, various studies were done on ‘decolonizing’ museums and exhibition narratives (cf. Tlostanova, 2017, Kassim, 2020). As some researchers argue, many problematic decolonizing efforts consist of inviting minority curators/scholars/educators to produce exhibitions in the museum space or serve as consultants, checking the ‘inclusive’ and ‘diversity’ boxes off the list while preserving the *status quo* in power relations within our societies (cf. Boast, 2011, Lynch, 2014).

Witcomb (2003) points out that the very ‘political rationality’ of the museum uncovers its structural flaws; since museums in their representation of colonial hierarchies are *putting on display* (often unconsciously) problematic patterns and provoking calls for change from communities and activist groups. In the disciplinary field, though, the critique would not be possible without recent museological research, starting from the new museology and the idea of the social responsibility of museums.

The ‘decolonization’ discourse, however, becomes appropriated by the academic discipline studying heritage as one of the current trends in scholarship, alongside the ‘digitization’, ‘Disneyfication’, and all the other ways of ‘thinking with museums’. Rephrasing Audre Lorde’s famous quote (1984), the master’s tools are not suitable to dismantle the master’s house; furthermore, we want to argue that this mode of knowledge production reiterates the same hegemonic Western practices that were lying in the foundation of both museums and academic disciplines: it deprives the ‘studied’ subjects of their agency and provides them with new hierarchies and classifications.

The second point which we want to address is one of neutrality and objectivity.

There is an emerging movement in the museum and museum organizations taking the role of social justice in human rights; stating that “museums are not neutral” (e.g. Murawski, 2017). Museums, however, have never been neutral. The institution itself embodies perpetuation of social, cultural, racial, and ethnic inequalities while adding to complex social and economic injustices on a global scale. The controversy between their perceived ‘neutrality’ and the demands to decolonize the museum is evidence of dynamic processes in the museum world.

Case Studies

Art of the Americas was an experimental exhibition opened in March 2018 at the Max Chambers Library, University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), USA. It was curated by one of the co-authors (Shikoh Shiraiwa). Shiraiwa questioned

the practice of dividing museum objects into different academic disciplines and separate museums, especially fine art and ethnological or archaeological artifacts. Therefore, he focused on displaying diverse cultural objects altogether. For example, one of the cases displayed a 20th-century American Taos painting, Mexican festival masks, 9th-century Mayan clay figures, and a contemporary African American painting side-by-side. The exhibition was based entirely on the university's collections.

Art of the Americas encouraged the audience to see all the cultural objects on equal footing. It was essential to ignore the monetary values of the objects as those values, arguably, have been constructed from the perspective of Western material culture and aesthetics. It also questioned the idea of "fine art" and a Western concept of linear history. Fine arts are often divided into 'eras' and 'styles,' such as Renaissance, Impressionism, Avant-Garde, and so on, which became the universal standard of history of art production. Classifying some objects as 'fine art' indicates one aesthetics over others, notably indicating one culture over others. *Art of the Americas* aimed to deconstruct this practice.

In 2021, Shiraiwa is planning to visit UCO to co-curate a new exhibition. This exhibition will expand *Art of the Americas* further, to the global perspective, within the limitations of the UCO Art Collections.

Continuing to experiment with new ideas and methods is a critical part of 'decolonizing' the long-established imperial and colonial ideology embedded into museum practice. This new exhibition aims to deconstruct part of the museum's naturalized cultural hierarchies in a visible manner to seek a better way to exhibit and narrate all the cultural objects on equal footing.

Concluding remarks

One cannot decolonize museums only by means of academic thought, as this thought is based on the racist coloniality of knowledge. In our further work we plan to apply the idea of Lurajane Smith regarding heritage as a repeated performance to the repetitive performance of teaching and being taught at the academic institution, arguing that academia is also a heritage-making institution which preserves and reconstructs a certain set of cultural and social perspectives as a universal standard. Our inquiry considers how the decolonization discourse can be used as a reflexive tool in both museology and museum practice without being converted into the new 'hegemonic' system of knowledge.

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