Shaaon Bhattacharya

Is it time for museums and galleries to decolonise their collections, and if so, how should they go about it?

In 2020, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford removed 'tsantsa' - shrunken heads of ancestors from the Shuar culture - from display on the grounds that 'the way they were displayed did not sufficiently help visitors understand the cultural practices related to their making and instead led people to think in stereotypical and racist ways about Shuar culture'[1], thus shining a light on the hot button issue of decolonising museums. The International Council of Museums describes a museum's mission as the acquisition and exhibition of "the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity … for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment".[2] Given this focus on education, it behoves museums to ensure that their collections should be presented in as complete a way as possible, an idea which lies at the heart of decolonisation. In this context, the most appropriate definition of decolonisation is "a process that institutions undergo to expand the perspectives they portray beyond those of the dominant cultural group, particularly white colonizers".[3] Given that museums and galleries view their role as educators, this reversal of the 'European colonial lens', through which the Global South was and continues to be seen, would "provide additional information and context to the items they hold".[4] In addition, decolonising in this way is a first step towards acknowledging the moral debt that museums have to the colonies for filling their collections and has the potential to at least initiate processes of what Mason-Macklin calls 'social healing' – "the reconciliation of modern Western society with the legacy of colonialism".[5] There is no consensus method of decolonisation, and the controversial process of repatriation is not necessarily implied. Reconceptualising the display of artefacts is the clear alternative in many cases.

---

[1] Anon., 2020. *Pitt Rivers Museum: Shrunken Heads.* [Online]
[2] 2017. *Museum Definition - ICOM.* [Online]

[3] Hatzipanagos, R., 2018. *The 'decolonization' of the American museum.* [Online].
[4] *Statement on Decolonisation: Museums Association.* [Online].

[5] Mason-Macklin, H., n.d. *Museum in Progress: Decolonizing Museums.*

The first argument in favour of decolonising the museums and galleries is that it is in the interest of the institutions themselves. The British Museum, which holds controversial artefacts such as the Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles, claims on its website that the objects it houses and displays "allow us to explore the extraordinary diversity of human cultures … to realise how closely they are interconnected".[6] Clearly then, alongside the official description of a museum's mission above, the primary purpose of a museum or gallery is to educate visitors, and it must be in the institutions' interest to improve the quality of this education. By adding historical and cultural context to each object, the museums would provide a more complete description of the items they hold, and therefore better educate the museumgoers. This may even involve removing displays, such as in the case of the Shuar shrunken heads at the Pitt Rivers, to ensure they are not decontextualised – and providing an explanation for this decision.

Decolonisation of museum and gallery collections is also in the interest of wider society, and especially those whose cultural property the institutions house. It can be argued that museum and gallery collections continue the colonial legacy, given that "the practice of collecting was intimately tied to the dominating psychology of colonialism".[7] If museums continue to display artefacts without acknowledging their cultural importance or the (potentially bloody) history of how they came to be in the collections, it will simply extend the distorted western imperial lens through which the global south was seen during the colonial era. If, however, this greater detail is displayed alongside the objects, it can at the very least be an acknowledgement of the true nature of colonial looting that was central to the foundation of museums in the Victorian era.[8] This can help repair some colonial scars and be the initial building blocks of social healing, which in this context refers to using the educational influence of museums to acknowledge the role of colonialism in modern Western

[6] *The British Museum: About Us.* [Online]
[7] Hunt, T., 2019. *The Guardian: Should museums return their colonial artefacts?.* [Online]
[8] Hunt, T., 2019. *The Guardian: Should museums return their colonial artefacts?* [Online]

society, to counteract nostalgic over-glorification of Western colonial history. In this way, decolonising museum collections can start a wider process of decolonising society.

Given that decolonisation is primarily about 'opening up the museum', such that a wider range of perspectives are displayed, the process must be driven by collaboration between those who have different perspectives. Mason-Macklin (2018) argues that there are two types of understanding about each object or item that museums and galleries hold – academic knowledge, which can be obtained through traditional academic research, and cultural knowledge, often inherited or acquired through lived experience. This cultural knowledge provides deeper understanding of the historical context and cultural significance of artefacts, which provides an essential complement to the academic knowledge. However, the fact that "museums traditionally tend to value academic knowledge far more,"[9] must be addressed as part of the process of decolonisation. The Pitt Rivers Museum is perhaps the best example of how museums and galleries should decolonise their collections. The general policy of the Oxford museum is to "educate visitors about the way many of the museum's 500,000 artefacts were violently taken as a result of British imperial expansion and occupation, then presented in a way that portrayed other cultures as inferior"[10] – exactly what decolonisation should entail on a larger scale. In the example of the exhibit mentioned earlier, Pitt Rivers staff have been working with Shuar delegates to decide the best strategy for the display of, and care for, these human remains. There needs to be a similar approach to each and every item in these collections.

The approach detailed above is for those artefacts that will remain in the museum and gallery collections, but in a number of cases, the physical repatriation of artefacts to their countries of origin may be the best method of decolonisation. Hicks (2020) has argued that "where an object has been looted, and a community asks for it back, western museums have a duty actively to make a return" –

[9] Mason-Macklin, H., n.d. *Museum in Progress: Decolonizing Museums.*
[10] Batty, D., 2020. *The Guardian - Off with the heads: Pitt Rivers Museum removes human remains from display.* [Online]

on the basis that not only is there "a moral right for the original owners to retain the object" as Evans put it, but also that such action "offers an opportunity to fulfil the curator's principal job: to understand their collections better".[11] The Benin Bronzes are an example of artefacts that should be physically repatriated according to this reasoning, and are the main focus of Hicks's book *The Brutish Museums* – these were looted by the British Army from the royal capital at Benin City in 1897. Progress has been made in this case, with Jesus College, Cambridge, becoming the first institution to return its Benin Bronze in October 2021.[12] There are arguments against this policy, including the suggestion that these artefacts are more likely to be maintained better than if they were repatriated. As such, it may not be as simple as what Hicks suggests – rather, expert bodies should adopt a case-by-case approach to determine how and where best to display the artefacts. To take a famous example, Greece has been calling for the repatriation of the Elgin Marbles to the Acropolis Museum for years. Considering the quality of the maintenance and display of the parts of the Parthenon frieze which remain in Greece, there is no reason to not repatriate those held elsewhere. Some may argue that, if such a policy was enacted, museums and galleries would be left empty. Hicks offers a solution to this: filling each gap created by the return of an object by new work made by artists, writers etc from the dispossessed community, "to help museums remember and bear witness to colonialism today."[13] Solutions such as this can help institutions to do the morally correct thing by returning stolen property, while not compromising the ability to educate visitors about foreign and diverse cultures.

Given the arguments above, it is time for museums and galleries to decolonise their collections, and, crucially, it is in their interest to do so. As their primary purpose is to educate, the more complete description and display of every object, that should be the product of decolonisation, improves the

[11] Hicks, D., 2020. *The Brutish Museums (*p239*),* Evans, R. J., 2021. [Interview] (15 December 2021).
[12] Anon., 2021. *Jesus College returns Benin Bronze in world first.* [Online]

[13] Hicks, D., 2020. *The Brutish Museums.*

quality of the education that these institutions can provide, with artefacts no longer divorced entirely from their cultural significance and their history no longer hushed up. The acknowledgement of colonial looting that will likely come with decolonisation of museum collections is likely to encourage some sense of social healing between the dispossessed communities and the colonisers who have dominated the discourse for centuries – decolonising museum collections can be a crucial building block to initiate the decolonisation of society, and as such this is in the interest of the community more generally. Objects that were looted by western colonisers and whose return has been requested should be repatriated, with Western nations helping to ensure their maintenance is not compromised. This can lead to social healing on an international scale, with the gaps filled by new work from these dispossessed communities, such that the educational role of museums remains. For those objects that cannot be repatriated, there should be co-operation between those who have academic and cultural knowledge to situate the object at hand in its most appropriate context. No two objects will be decolonised in the same way, but every object should be decolonised.

References

Adams, G. K., 2020. *Does the argument that museums hold collections on behalf of the world still stand?.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/01/17012020-does-universality-argument-still-stand/#
[Accessed 16 January 2022].

Agencies, 2005. *The Guardian.* [Online]
[Accessed 2021 December].

Anon., 2017. *Museum Definition - ICOM.* [Online]
Available at: https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/

Anon., 2020. *Pitt Rivers Museum: Shrunken Heads.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/shrunken-heads
[Accessed 30 December 2021].

Anon., 2021. *Jesus College returns Benin Bronze in world first.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/articles/jesus-college-returns-benin-bronze-world-first
[Accessed 19 January 2021].

Anon., n.d. *British Museum: Benin Bronzes.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes
[Accessed 16 December 2021].

Anon., n.d. *Statement on Decolonisation: Museums Association.* [Online].

Anon., n.d. *The British Museum: About Us.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us
[Accessed 29 December 2021].

Batty, D., 2020. *The Guardian - Off with the heads: Pitt Rivers Museum removes human remains from display.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/sep/13/off-with-the-heads-pitt-rivers-museum-removes-human-remains-from-display
[Accessed 30 December 2021].

Britannica, n.d. *Elgin Marbles.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Elgin-Marbles

Evans, R. J., 2021. [Interview] (15 December 2021).

Hatzipanagos, R., 2018. *The 'decolonization' of the American museum.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/12/decolonization-american-museum/
[Accessed 27 December 2021].

Hicks, D., 2020. *The Brutish Museums.* London: Pluto Press.

Hunt, T., 2019. *The Guardian: Should museums return their colonial artefacts?.* [Online]
Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jun/29/should-museums-return-their-

colonial-artefacts
[Accessed 15 December 2021].

Marshall, A., 2020. *NY Times: This Art Was Looted 123 Years Ago. Will It Ever Be Returned?.* [Online] Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/arts/design/benin-bronzes.html
[Accessed 16 December 2021].

Mason-Macklin, H., n.d. *Museum in Progress: Decolonizing Museums.* s.l.: s.n.

Savoy, B. & Sarr, F., 2018. *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage,* s.l.: s.n.

UNESCO, n.d. *UNESCO - Illicit Trafficking.* [Online].