

## Decolonization: Museums and Their Responsibility to Own Their Past

Decolonization is a term that is used across several disciplines. To understand it, it is important to first define colonialism. Stanford Encyclopedia defines colonialism as “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another...”<sup>1</sup> That being said, decolonization is more than just the undoing of colonialism; it involves the recognition and ownership of an institution’s (particularly Western and European entities) past imperial ties and actions, as well as the conscious effort to dismantle the colonialist ideologies and practices. Institutions undergoing decolonization must address the culturally oppressive natures of their foundations not by just taking fault for their histories but by also taking responsibility and further steps to heal the cultures or societies that were harmed. Museums in particular have a responsibility to consciously undergo decolonization in order to stay relevant and to remain as non-neutral intuitions of education and forward thinking.

It is important in these cases that museums address their foundations and take steps to rectify their relationships with the cultures that were impacted by colonialism. There are several ways to do so. One that is probably the most dramatic yet can be seen as the most effective, is the complete disassembly and reassembly of a museum and its collection. It is important that between these steps, museums take the appropriate amount of time and research to reconnect with the roots of its collections. A great example of this is the Mille Lacs Indian Museum in Minnesota. It was closed for a several years after its opening in 1960, then reopened in 1996 as a tribal museum, which was different from the way in which they approached their artifacts and remains.<sup>2</sup> It became a sort of “hybrid” museum in which the Minnesota Historical Society and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe (part of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe) worked together to properly display their artifacts and inform the public not only of the conqueror’s perspective, but also that of the conquered. In doing so, the museum transformed from just a vessel to display stolen Native objects, to a more historically accurate and sensitive site for learning and reclaiming of the past.

Furthermore, museums can and should work with the indigenous communities from which their collections originated in order to create a more well-informed and multi-perspective exhibit. These collaborative efforts are unfortunately rare but have proven to be a more convenient yet still effective way in which a museum can practically re-write their history and begin to make amends. In 2012, the San Diego Museum of Man moved their previously displayed human remains of the native Kumeyaay Nation to proper burial grounds belonging to their respective tribes. The museum’s deputy director Ben Garcia, commented on their decolonization efforts by working directly with the Kumeyaay Nation, saying “We need to move from seeing ourselves in a position of authority to positioning ourselves as a platform for conversation to come and be present...It means including perspectives at the museum that should

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<sup>1</sup> Kohn, Margaret, and Kavita Reddy. “Colonialism.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, August 29, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>.

<sup>2</sup> Lonetree, Amy. *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

have always been included, but historically were not.”<sup>3</sup> The museum took a step further in 2017 by passing a policy that descendants must give consent to display remains of their people.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Canadian Museum of History established the Human Remains Policy in 1991 with like intentions, and have since returned many human remains to the First Nations in Canada<sup>5</sup>.

Many museums have colonial frameworks built on collections that were given to them by wealthy patrons who reaped the benefits of the empires they served. Much of this was done without ill intent, though an institution’s intention does not dictate the public’s reaction. Indeed, some of the first museums were made with the goal of educating and engaging the public. The British Parliament purchased Hans Sloane’s collection of natural history specimens (deriving mostly from Jamaica) in 1753, creating the basis of the British Museum<sup>6</sup>. Notably, Sloane was later criticized for traveling to Jamaica at the time and exploiting the slave market. Consequentially, in 2020, the British Museum moved the bust of Sloane from a (literal) high pedestal to a nearby cabinet of the museum, to be “juxtaposed with objects that reflect that Sloane’s collection was created in the context of the British Empire and the slave economy”<sup>7</sup>. Through it was a move that was acknowledged nearly one hundred and fifty years after its conception, it was a forward-thinking move on the museum’s part. It is just a small move, however, in many that are necessary to fully address the many other artifacts in the British Museum that have been acquired via unsavory and often violent means.

Most infamously are the Benin Bronzes, which is a group of over a thousand artifacts stolen by the British army during their invasion of the Kingdom of Benin (modern day Nigeria) in 1897<sup>8</sup>. Following several auctions and sales, pieces from the Benin Bronzes are now held in several museums across the world. This begs the question: who do these objects belong to: the people who possess them, or the people from which they were stolen from? This is a debate that is still on-going. It can even be argued that many museums rely on big exhibits like those showing the Benin Bronzes for their own livelihood. However, the root of the problem is not the actual display of the Bronzes, but the implications they contain; they represent the brutal way in which they were stolen, the many lives that were murdered and enslaved in the process, and the abuse and gross display of power by Western institutions by purchasing and displaying these objects. To this day, only a few out of the dozens of museums have promised to return some of the artifacts. Most recently, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art removed their

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<sup>3</sup> Hatzipanagos, Rachel. “The 'Decolonization' of the American Museum.” The Washington Post. WP Company, October 29, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/12/decolonization-american-museum/>.

<sup>4</sup> Hatzipanagos

<sup>5</sup> Shoenberger, Elisa. “What Does It Mean to Decolonize a Museum?” MuseumNext, November 18, 2021. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander, Edward P., Mary Alexander, and Juilee Decker. *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Harris, Gareth. “Debate Flares as British Museum Moves Bust of Slave-Ownning Founder Hans Sloane.” The Art Newspaper - International art news and events. The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, September 28, 2021. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/08/25/debate-flares-as-british-museum-moves-bust-of-slave-owning-founder-hans-sloane>.

<sup>8</sup> “Benin Bronzes: Germany to Return Looted Artefacts to Nigeria.” BBC News. BBC, April 30, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56949003>.

Benin Bronzes and have begun the process of returning them to Nigeria, joining the ranks of Scotland's University of Aberdeen, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, and Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac in Paris<sup>9</sup>. The British Museum is still undergoing negotiations with the Nigerian government to either split the ownership of their portion of the Benin Bronzes or return the whole or part of their collection (efforts of which have been going on for decades with little to no positive result)<sup>10</sup>.

Museums have an important role to play in society as both keepers of the past and educators of the future. They have a responsibility to adhere to decolonization to stay relevant in today's society. Whether it be by collaborating with the previously oppressed cultures they display or reframing their collections entirely, museums need to take steps to repent for their forefather's actions and make amends with those impacted by the brutalities of colonialism. It is a slow and painful process, but in the last few decades, it has been proven to be very much so possible. The hope is that this trend continues, and institutions can become more and more self-aware.

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<sup>9</sup> Stevens, Matt. "Smithsonian Moves toward Returning Benin Bronzes." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 5, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/05/arts/design/smithsonian-benin-bronzes.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Stevens

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