

Culture

How to decolonize a museum

Sarah Jilani argues that Western institutions must interrogate their own colonial histories

By **Sarah Jilani**



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“Cultural progress is made . . . through honest dialogue and commitment to follow through”, urged a recent letter from nineteen cultural, educational and community organizations in the US. The letter’s recipient was the Brooklyn Museum. Organized by Decolonize This Place, a New York-based action group, this letter was a follow-up to an earlier one, which explained the community’s objections to a high-profile hiring decision. It was shared extensively on social media after the full text was published by Hyperallergic on April 12, 2018. That it resonated beyond Brooklyn was no surprise. It encapsulated a debate occurring on both sides of the Atlantic, which concerns the colonial histories of Western museums, the narratives surrounding people of colour that such histories perpetuate, and an apparent lack of interest in addressing it.

That earlier letter, “[Your Curatorial Crisis is an Opportunity to Decolonize](#)”, recommended the creation of a “Decolonization Commission” after Kristen Windmuller-Luna, a white woman, was hired as the new chief curator of the museum’s African collection. Windmuller-Luna’s curatorial approach may of course be profoundly decolonial; but what stands up in the letter is the idea that structural injustices can easily prevent a truly meritocratic line-up of candidates, reflective of society as a whole, in the first place. In failing to understand how tone-deaf this hiring decision was, the Brooklyn Museum also failed to acknowledge the lived experiences of all those people for whom our current approach to “doing culture” has not been working for a long time. For the signatories, the remnants of colonialism are still clear, whether they be in Brooklyn’s gentrification, which has often occurred along race lines, or in the approaches that the majority population all too often adopts towards minority cultures.

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The art, culture and heritage sectors here in the UK can often trace their histories back to the British Empire. Initiatives, campaigns and exhibitions devoted to decolonizing UK institutions over the past two years or so have sought to demonstrate this. A one-day symposium at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, *Museums in a Post-Colonial Commonwealth*, which took place in April, examined how non-Western cultures, histories and material objects have been represented in the Western museum. What appeared to be a step in the right direction was short-lived and underwhelming, however. A one-day symposium to tackle how to represent (what unfortunately read like) “the rest of the world” revealed a more fundamental obstacle to Liverpool’s project: the Western institution’s self-image as the objective arbiter in a passions-driven world.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery’s #ThePastIsNow exhibition promised a more substantial approach. A group of co-curators of colour were invited to set up an exhibition from the Museum’s permanent collection to address its colonial history. The final result was informative and at times even moving, contextualizing objects as part of often traumatic histories. One of its guest co-curators, Sumaya Kassim, however, questioned whether the museum had successfully examined its own biases. “I do not want to see decolonisation become part of Britain’s national narrative as a pretty curio with no substance”, she wrote in **a piece** published on *Media Diversified*, that also recounts her feeling of being treated tokenistically. “Or, worse, for decoloniality to be claimed as yet another great British accomplishment: *the railways, two world wars, one world cup, and decolonisation.*”



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The questioning of long-held beliefs and understanding of the full histories behind institutions should have positive repercussions for everyone. But as the Brooklyn, Liverpool and Birmingham cases highlight, decolonizing cultural institutions is not straightforward. Their attempts suggest that the key issue at this early stage is a lack of understanding about what decolonizing an institution means, and what it entails. A genuinely decolonial approach would see museums interrogate their positions as apparently objective caretakers of non-Western objects and artefacts. The assumption of Western objectivity is not only divorced from the material conditions in which those objects have come to be “owned” by Western knowledge - knowledge informed by a history of contact on unequal terms - but it also instantiates the exceptionalism with which Western cultures have felt entitled to the final, objective say on other cultures. By acknowledging this, and then pursuing new roles and missions, institutions could take a number of concrete steps, such as repatriating objects where feasible, especially if they were plundered from peoples for whom they sustain cultural value; embracing greater accountability towards their local communities; and consider the colonial and racial legacies informing their operations and governance.

Such “undoings” would be incomplete without new action, which could see: the curation of collections to reflect the imperial acquisition and representation of the objects; improving the conditions of their underpaid and often migrant labour; and questioning the ethnic and class homogeneity in their boardrooms. Decolonization is an ongoing process, but its justice and methods grow more obvious through practice.



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There is a recurring mistake in much of the public discussion surrounding decolonization: that it is something to be done by, about and for people of colour. But decolonization is different from diversification: it demands fundamental change rather than mere representation. It is about how museums can facilitate historical accuracy by engaging their majority-white audiences with how cultures, societies and national identities today remain deeply shaped by the era of colonialism.

They may want to look to the twenty-three-year-old Alice Procter's *Uncomfortable Art Tours* while they are at it. Started in June 2017, they now run at six museums. Each tour takes visitors through a major national collection while explaining the role of colonialism in its shaping and funding. A discussion of an eighteenth-century portrait may reflect on the sitter's lesser known links to the slave trade; an "exotic" Elizabethan artefact may reveal the global reach of that era's economic plunder; the museum itself may have a founding story set against the backdrop of imperialism.

As an individual running these tours independently, Procter is not afraid of tracing the historical context she provides right up to its present-day economic, political and social legacies, touching on topics from immigration policy to Brexit. In 2016, [YouGov found](#) that 43 per cent of the public thought the British Empire was a good thing (25 per cent did not know). Our art and artefacts have the power to tell us what we should value, emulate and preserve; the work of decolonizing museums is therefore vital, and it must allow for nuance and complexity - a real conversation about Britain's history. To better understand ourselves, we



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must come to understand how colonialism shaped our past and how its legacy still haunts our present.

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- This article was amended on June 11. We had incorrectly stated that the *Uncomfortable Art Tours* were free.

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