



Moorish Camel Driver, a mid-20th century work by the sculptor Marguerite Milward, was displayed in *The Past Is Now* show at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Tackling colonial legacies

Museums are facing up to their problematic pasts and starting the slow process of decolonising their collections and operations, says Geraldine Kendall Adams

In 1897, at the height of his country's colonisation of the Congo, King Leopold of Belgium staged a popular exhibition on his Belgian estate featuring a mock African village, where European visitors could watch 267 Congolese women, men and children going about their daily lives in a kind of human zoo. Seven of the village's inhabitants died of pneumonia and influenza during the course of the show.

That display formed the basis of what eventually became the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, just outside Brussels. It's a palatial institution that, until recently, embraced a series of familiar imperial narratives in its telling of history: colonisation was presented as a force for civilisation and artwork on display showed the native population as either savage or

childlike, with Leopold himself glorified as the Congo's founding father. In reality, the king's 23-year reign of terror reduced the country's population by half through genocide, starvation and disease.

The museum will reopen in December after a five-year redevelopment, rebranded as the AfricaMuseum, an ethnographic and natural history venue that will offer a more honest depiction of the relationship between Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It promises not to flinch from the brutal truth, not just about colonisation but also the role the museum played in propagating the myths of empire. Exhibits from the original collection will be placed in their true context and the museum will feature a new building to house the history and living culture of central Africa, with collections

that are built and curated by the Congolese community. Work by contemporary African artists has replaced the figures of white colonialists that once adorned the building, with a monumental sculpture by the Congolese artist Aimé Mpane, entitled Congo, New Breath (Nouveau Souffle Ou Le Congo Bourgeonnant), occupying the museum's central rotunda, where a statue of King Leopold once stood.

It's a deliberately symbolic statement: the reimagining of the Royal Museum of Central Africa aims to be a milestone in the longstanding and often painful discourse around decolonisation in museums. Given its problematic origins, the museum had to confront its imperial past head-on. But it is fair to say that many other institutions are only at the beginning of this journey – and ▶

some still prefer to look away from the less savoury aspects of their history.

The term “decolonisation” is becoming increasingly visible, both in the museum sector and the wider public consciousness, thanks largely to the efforts of activists and indigenous groups. In the UK, Rhodes Must Fall, the campaign to compel Oxford University to remove its statue of the 19th-century prime minister of South Africa, Cecil Rhodes – a white supremacist seen as the father of apartheid – exposed the veneer of respectability still afforded to the white profiteers of colonialism and slavery. Uncomfortable Art Tours, run by the independent historian Clare Procter, aim to confront visitors with the questionable history of the paintings and artefacts found in London’s national museums.

Radical voices

Within the museum sector itself, the Museum Detox network for black and minority ethnic (BAME) museum professionals, founded in 2014, has become a radical voice for holding institutions to account on issues of race and representation. And a number of recent exhibitions, both in the UK and internationally, have approached the issue from new angles.

Earlier this year, the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (the museum of fine, applied and decorative arts) in Hamburg, Germany, staged a ground-breaking exhibition, Mobile Worlds or the Museum of Our Transcultural Present, that grouped objects according to the global movement of people and ideas, a perspective that aimed to challenge the Eurocentric order of traditional classification methods. Ayurvedic Man: Encounters with Indian Medicine at the Wellcome Collection in London explored how western medicine co-opted and benefited from the medical wisdom of indigenous cultures, while at the same time holding them in contempt. Visitors were invited to scrutinise not just the objects on display but who collected them, and the often-exploitative nature of collecting itself.

Earlier this year, the Windrush scandal, which saw legal immigrants from the Caribbean wrongfully deported or denied access to vital services, highlighted the structural racism that remains the most pernicious legacy of colonialism. But this awareness has yet to filter through more widely: a recent poll showed that 59% of people in the UK believed the British empire was something to be proud of.

Countering this view is vital; but what does the decolonisation of museums look like in practice? It’s a topic that causes much debate among curators and activists, but two unanimous viewpoints stand out: meaningful decolonisation should be a slow, embedded process rather than a time-limited action, and decolonisation cannot be



Left: the Royal Museum of Central Africa, near Brussels, began its life as an imperial venue with a colonial viewpoint, but has recently rebranded and re-aligned itself to become the AfricaMuseum, which opens this December

Below, left: the Congolese artist Aimé Mpane’s work, Congo, New Breath, is in the rotunda of the AfricaMuseum, Brussels, in the place of the old statue of King Leopold, who helped found the original museum

Right: an oil painting of the MP and slave trade advocate George Hibbert on display in the Museum of London Docklands exhibition Slavery, Culture and Collecting



meaningful without proper diversification of the workforce.

“What we have to keep in mind is that it’s a process,” says Subhadra Das, the curator of science at University College London (UCL), whose current exhibition, Bricks and Mortals, explores the links of the university’s founders to the eugenicist movement (see box, p27). “If anyone feels like the job is done [after one project] then they’re seriously deluded.”

Das welcomes the attention being given to the subject, but is cautious about it becoming a tokenistic term used by museums in a “self-congratulatory way” that doesn’t bring about real change. “We are all talking about it now, but is it the case that people of colour are finding more opportunities to be employed?” she asks. “That is not the case.”

In her work, Das views the process of decolonisation as a three-part continuum: acknowledgement, reflection and change. “Colonisation is like a cake that has already been baked – we cannot unbake it, but our role as museums is to be aware that the museum is a colonial tool.

“Acknowledgement is the primary step,” Das adds – a tool for overcoming the erasure, denial and reduction that are hallmarks of the colonialist treatment of history. “Then reflection – what does it mean for us now going forward?”

The final step is to ask whether change is possible. “We cannot decolonise the museum without decolonising society,” Das says. This means not only challenging the topic head-on, but also continuing to be

being politically and socially engaged. It’s something that might cause anxiety to some museum professionals, who cherish the idea of their institution being a neutral, objective space. “That is nonsense – not simply nonsense, but dangerous,” says Das. “It’s phenomenally irresponsible. Now is not the time to be deluding ourselves about our role in society. If museums are neutral, then what is the point of them?”

She urges museums not to shy away from difficult subject matter out of fear of alienating visitors.

“If your audience is predominantly white and middle class you need to look at that,” Das says. “If the concern is that [decolonising] upsets or alienates – then there’s no point in starting. It’s also unfair to existing audiences. I’d like to give them more credit than that.”

The process of decolonisation can also be hard for those involved behind the scenes. Last year, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery staged a hard-hitting temporary exhibition, The Past Is Now, which used

artwork and objects from its collection to interrogate Birmingham’s role in the British empire and challenge the venue’s colonial past. Items on display included a 1964 letter between two of the museum’s curators casually suggesting that relics captured from members of the Mau Mau army during an uprising in Kenya, including two blood-stained knives, might make an “amusing addition... to our Africal [sic] collection”.

Co-curation

The museum worked with eight external curators – all women of colour from diverse backgrounds – to develop the exhibition. Its approach reflects the growing use of co-curation as a means of bringing in new perspectives and challenging existing narratives. Although co-curation can be a powerful tool, The Past Is Now highlighted some of the tensions that can arise from the process. One particular issue was the emotional and intellectual labour that was asked of the co-curators, for which they did not feel they were fairly remunerated.

Sumaya Kassim, a researcher, writer and one of the co-curators, wrote an essay about her experiences, titled “The museum will not be decolonised”, that has been shared widely in the sector. In it, she described a tense process that ended in a confrontation in which the co-curators rejected the museum’s final interpretative text and wrote their own version. She wrote that “institutions need to stop considering giving access to BAME people’s own cultures something they should be grateful for”. ▶

‘We are all talking about it now, but is it the case that people of colour are finding more opportunities to be employed?’



Left: The Brothers Krull (Black Helvetia), 2015, a photograph by Dom Smaz, was on show as part of Mobile Worlds at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg. This work identifies two brothers of German and African descent, whose ancestors used to run one of the largest slave-run coffee plantations in the Bahia state of Brazil

Facing page, left, below: the Garrigarrang First Australians Gallery at the Australian Museum in Sydney, where significant displays are devoted to the continent's indigenous people

Right: the UCL Bricks and Mortals walking tour, London. This panel identifies Francis Galton, the Victorian scientist who coined the term 'eugenics', and has been altered by a passer-by with the words 'what a bastard'

Museum decolonisation in action

Bricks and Mortals

Ongoing, UCL, Bloomsbury campus, London

A walking tour that exposes the role the university played in establishing and legitimising the science of eugenics, which advocated for selective breeding to ensure the genetic superiority of human populations. Many campus buildings are named after prominent eugenicists; visitors follow a self-guided tour while listening to a series of bite-size podcasts about each of those historic figures. Curated by Subhadra Das.

Slavery, Culture and Collecting

September 2018-19, Museum of London Docklands

A display that explores the "reputational whitewashing" of George Hibbert, a 19th-century pro-slavery lobbyist who used his philanthropic support of culture and generosity to London's poor to deflect criticism of his stance on the slave

trade. Hibbert was instrumental in building the West India Docks that now house the museum. Co-curated by Danielle Thom and Katie Donnington.

Words Matter

Published June 2018, Research Centre for Material Culture, Netherlands

A book that aims to dissect and dismantle the language used by cultural institutions. The publication comes after a debate in the Netherlands about whether museums should change the titles of paintings to remove derogatory, discriminatory or racist words. It is intended to empower museums to address the problematic terminology in wall texts and catalogues. Edited by Wayne Modest, the head of the Research Centre for Material Culture, and Robin Lelijveld, a researcher at the centre. To read the book online, visit mus.ms/2A4vKNV



"I didn't want to write an expose," says Kassim, "but I didn't want it to be viewed as a success."

Although co-curation is intended to work as a partnership of equals, it is an inescapable fact that the museum remains the gatekeeper of the objects and their interpretation. Part of the problem, says Kassim, was the balance of power in the relationship between the museum and the co-curators.

"In a community co-curation project, all these assumptions are made about cultural literacy - who is the professional, who is the one who needs to be taught and cultured?" Kassim says. "The whole time we assumed we were equals, but they were extracting decoloniality out of us."

Further tensions arose as the group explored and responded to the difficult subject matter, with the external curators' reactions at odds with the more detached approach of museum staff.

"There needed to be a kind of emotional openness, a degree of vulnerability on both

sides," says Kassim. "We were trying hard to get the staff to open up to us, but vulnerability isn't part of the job description. People assumed that when we were angry, we were angry at them. It was hard for us, but it was hard for them, too, and they weren't prepared for that."

Kassim says that for staff and co-curators, "there needs to be an element of therapy within this work. There needs to be more time and more thinking - it was extremely rushed. If we'd had more funding and time we could have been more nuanced."

Funding is often a sticking point. It is not just a museum's collections that need to be decolonised, but budgets and staff recruitment, says Laura van Broekhoven, the director of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, which hosted a Museum Ethnographers Group conference on decolonisation in museum practice earlier this year.

"We need to make sure we are not inviting people in only for project work," she says. "It's not embedded and institutional-

ised yet - it's time limited and dependent on funding from elsewhere. If we are really serious it should be a serious change."

To avoid some of the tensions outlined by Kassim, Van Broekhoven recommends staff are trained in empathetic communication to "create a space where we can agree that it's going to be painful but not a personal thing. Curators can feel like all the work they've done so far is useless and that they are being slapped in the face for not noticing certain things before."

After her work on *The Past is Now*, Kassim concluded that museums lacked the tools to decolonise themselves, a view that is shared by many others.

Nathan Sentance, a projects officer at the Australian Museum, Sydney, says: "Most museums do what [the Hawaiian activist] Poka Laenui refers to as 'surface accommodation', where the incorporation of cultural protocols or First Nations knowledge in the project is at a shallow level to give the appearance of indigenous ownership."

Sentance, who is from the aboriginal Wiradjuri nation, runs a blog called the Archival Decolonist, one of whose aims is to "challenge the notion that museums are inherently good". One of the biggest myths museums tell themselves, he says, is that they "are the key to preserving First Nations culture. In fact, museums are part of colonisation, and culture loss was not a problem before colonisation. First Nations people do not need help preserving culture."

In some circles, the discourse is moving from decolonisation to indigenisation, which seeks to embed indigenous ways of working, knowing and learning fully into the structure of an institution.

For now though, museums remain the gatekeepers. When will they be prepared to hand over the keys?

There is a session on decolonising museums at the Museums Association Conference in Belfast, 8-10 November.
www.museumsassociation.org/conference