

Decolonising UK World Art Institutions, 1945-1980

Claire Wintle

Between 1945 and 1980, UK museums and their collections of art and artefacts from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas played an active political and social role in attempting to decolonise the British Empire. As spaces which forced museum practitioners and visitors to contend with the material remnants of empire, and as arenas which demanded the interpretation of a world undergoing rapid political change, in their very materiality, UK museums of world art and anthropology supported the trialling and enacting of forms of decolonisation, neo-colonialism, independence and anti-colonial resistance.¹ They acted as microcosms of wider political encounters.

While pre-1945 and post-1980 UK museum practice and world cultures collections are relatively well researched, attention to the intervening years has been minimal and limited to individual institutions. One assumption, often emphasising stagnant display practices, is that museums with world cultures collections were "scenes of neglect".² In 1987, in his summary of the mid-century period, broadcaster and author Kenneth Hudson wrote that such organisations "may collect widely, but they do not dig deeply. The political consequences of doing so would be too serious, or so it is felt".³ But while the particular political consequences of world art museum practice may sometimes have been buried, they were also emphasised and exploited in important ways. Indeed, while some museum displays remained neglected in this period, behind the scenes, UK world art institutions were dynamic spaces, attempting to manage new metropolitan cultures and the demands of the former colonies. While in some ways this was a deeply conservative moment in museum practice, in certain activities, the foundations of some of today's best, "decolonised" museum practice can be found.

There were certainly cases where British museum practice acted as a mask for progressive political change. Collections acquired through colonial frameworks continued to pour into museums as if Britain still ruled its subjects: when colonial officials returned to the UK after independence, many donated the collections they

had acquired during their careers abroad. Colonel Douglas Hamilton Gordon (1895-1961), for example, was a British Officer stationed in India for thirty-two years, but only began his programme of donating stone implements and pottery figurines to Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (MAE) and University College London's Institute of Archaeology after Indian independence and his corresponding retirement. There are also several cases of returnees retraining and taking on curatorial posts in the UK, such as William Archer, who was in the Indian Civil Service until 1948 and went on to become the Keeper of the Indian Section at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Kenneth Bradley, District Officer in Northern Rhodesia between 1926 and 1942 and the director of London's Imperial (later Commonwealth) Institute between 1953 and 1969. In some instances, smaller institutions disavowed their imperial histories: when West Berkshire Museum offered its Tibetan collections to a war-torn Liverpool Museum in 1950, it was typical of many smaller museums that had decided to move away from collecting and caring for world cultures exhibits in favour of a new emphasis on local social history, assuming that "local", "British" history did not include the "other".⁴ At the same time, the larger, more specialist museums that accepted these transfers cemented the colonial legacy that these collections evoked. In these ways, museums acted as devices through which those involved could retain their former imperial identities.

Yet we also see an early embracing of more collaborative, egalitarian museum practices in this period. For example, in 1950, the MAE in Cambridge hosted placements for practitioners from Sarawak and Singapore, and in 1966, the British Museum did the same with individuals from Nigeria, Malaya and Australia, supporting the development of museums in decolonising nations.⁵ Training and "sharing" expertise can of course be cast, rightly, in a paternalistic light, but decolonising countries were also able to make their mark on UK museum practice on other terms. Especially at university museums, postcolonial scholars used UK collections as a resource: the annual reports at MAE and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford are littered with reference to elite, educated scholars who employed UK museums for research purposes, and, indeed, added to the collections. Sometimes these donations were personal offerings of cosmopolitan, professionally interested individuals; in other cases they were officially framed as donations from national

bodies. The government of Pakistan, and the National Museum of India, for example, both donated series of objects to MAE after their countries' respective independences.⁶ If we understand the gift as forging reciprocity and indebtedness, these and other similar examples of decolonising nations donating to UK museums can be acknowledged as a shared collecting practice based on a changing, more equitable political relationship, and the self-confident global status of these new countries.

This period also saw the growth of national museums in former British colonies: they formed an important if complex arena for articulating political freedom, and British museum practitioners had to respond to their demands. For example, several museums acquiesced to requests from newly independent nations for the return of sacred objects from their collections during this period. In 1962, in the same year of Ugandan independence, MAE repatriated the regalia of the Ganda war deity Kibuuka to the new state's national museum. Indeed, as Derek Peterson observes, "the museological work of repatriation and reassembly was contemporaneous with the political work of self-constitution": the Minister of Education in the Kingdom of Buganda collected the sacred regalia from the Cambridge museum during the very same visit he made to the UK to finalise the legalities of his country's new constitution.⁷

Arguably, these requests weren't just concurrent with decolonisation, but occasions to trial, enact and push forward the end of empire. This was the case when Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and other Indian government officials became implicated in the return of a set of Buddhist relics to India which were then in the collections of the V&A and the British Museum. Both India and Ceylon had cultural and religious claims on the relics, and the Indian government used the practical process of repatriation to emphasise a rejection of British hegemony as well as develop an emergent pan-Asian cooperation.⁸ An amicable division of the relics between India and Ceylon eventually came about through lengthy negotiations between government departments and the interventions of Nehru and his counterpart in Ceylon, Dudley Senanayake. In a summary of the final result, an official in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs wrote: "The attempt of the British

Museum authorities to ignore Indian sentiments... can now be foiled... An opportunity has now been afforded to mitigate the feeling of ill-will to which any political differences may have given rise between the people of India and the people of Ceylon."⁹ Elsewhere, a government official in the Ministry of Education made clear that the "division [of the relics] will be at our initiative or our agreement with Ceylon and not by the UK."¹⁰ In these negotiations, countries were substituted for institutions, and world art had become a political matter.

Projecting the macropolitics of global change on the micropolitics of the museum tells us much about the broader role of museums historically and today. Museums mirror political change, but they are also more active than this. They help politicians, practitioners and audiences manage, trial, disavow and embrace geopolitical shifts.¹¹ In some unusual cases like the Commonwealth Institute, a museum-cum-trade centre which forged formal financial agreements with commonwealth countries in return for their representation, organisational and funding structures pushed museum practitioners to acknowledge decolonisation, forcing them to take decolonising nations seriously as stakeholders and collaborators.¹² More typically, it was the material presence of imperialism that museums had to contend with: there were simply so many remnants of empire, that they could not be ignored, even in the short term. They had to be confronted: hidden, exchanged, accepted, described, interpreted, displayed and – in exceptional cases – repatriated. Objects were a point of concern, contact and disagreement between emerging nations and the former metropole. It was the tangible and the material that forced museum staff members to conceive of and respond to a changing world, even if that process included denial and tentative assent as well as enthusiastic acceptance (figs 1 and 2).

Working at the interface of politics and museum practice also allows us to rethink the political moment itself: shedding light on mid-century museum practice and the role of newly independent nations in the British sector forces us to acknowledge that the 'end' of empire was not simply driven from the metropole, either at the museum or on a geopolitical level. Actors in the global South were agents too. We also see an eagerness *and* reticence in UK art institutions in the mid-twentieth century to engage with changing political circumstances: decolonisation, we are reminded, is both a

forward-looking *and* conservative process. The intersection between the disciplines of history and curating therefore calls for a more nuanced use of terminology. While historians describe 'decolonisation' as a mid-century moment and as a tentative, incomplete, even neo-imperial process that occurred in fits and starts, in museum and art gallery studies and practice, the term 'decolonisation' is used to refer to an eradication of imperialism from contemporary cultural institutions.¹³ Perhaps a realignment of these terms is required: 'decolonising the art institution' is a current, worthy aim, but in our bid to eliminate the deepest forms of colonial legacy, we might also acknowledge the more conservative, neo-colonial tendencies inherent in any form of 'decolonisation', in order to expunge those too.

Dr Claire Wintle is Senior Lecturer in the History of Art and Design at the University of Brighton, UK. Her research focuses on collecting and museums and examines the ways in which the material world interacts with the politics of empire, decolonisation and nationalism. She has a particular interest in Indian art and design and in the interpretation of India in museums, galleries and exhibitions. Her research has been published in journals such as the *American Historical Review*, the *Journal of the History of Collections*, *History Workshop Journal* and *Design and Culture*, amongst others. She is the author of *Colonial Collecting and Display: Encounters with Material Culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013) and, with Ruth Craggs, edited *Cultures of Decolonisation: Transnational Productions and Practices, 1945-1970* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). She is currently writing a monograph, *World Cultures Collections, Museums and Changing Britain, 1945-80*.

¹ For a detailed institutional case study exploring this argument, see Claire Wintle, "Decolonising the Museum: The Case of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes," *Museum & Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2013, pp. 185-201.

² Ivan Karp, "Other Cultures in Museum Perspective," in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1991, p. 378.

³ Kenneth Hudson, *Museums of Influence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. vii.

⁴ Correspondence from Herbert Coghlan, Newbury Museum, West Berkshire, to Liverpool Museum's director, 20 September 1949, Archives, Department of Ethnography, World Museum Liverpool. Museums in Birmingham and Manchester made acquisitions along similar lines in the 1950s and 1960s.

⁵ See annual reports of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Cambridge, 1950 and 1951; Department of Ethnography, "Report to the Sub-Committee of the Trustees for Ethnography on the State of the Department," May 1966, Archives, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, British Museum.

⁶ See annual reports of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Cambridge, 1952 and 1976.

⁷ Derek R. Peterson, "Introduction: Heritage Management in Colonial and Contemporary Africa," in Derek R. Peterson, Kodzo Gavua and Ciraj Rassool, eds, *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economies, Histories, and Infrastructures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 15-16.

⁸ For the complex history of the return of the relics, see Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007, pp. 133-164.

⁹ Internal memoranda, Ministry of External Affairs [n.d.], K/52/999/41, Records and Management Section, UK Branch, Ministry of External Affairs, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

¹⁰ Internal memoranda, Department of Education [n.d.], K/52/999/41, Records and Management Section, UK Branch, Ministry of External Affairs, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

¹¹ Claire Wintle, "Decolonizing the Smithsonian: Museums as Microcosms of Political Encounter," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 121, No. 5, 2016, p. 1519.

¹² Claire Wintle, "Decolonising the Museum: The Case of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes," *Museum & Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2013, pp. 185-201.

¹³ On the historiography of historical decolonisation studies see John Darwin, "Decolonization and the End of Empire," in Robin Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume V: Historiography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999. For decolonisation in museum studies see, for example, Christina Kreps, "Changing the Rules of the Road: Post-Colonialism and the New Ethics of Museum Anthropology," in Janet Marstine, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twentieth-Century Museum*, Routledge, London, 2011. On the disciplinary contradictions of the use of 'decolonisation', see, Claire Wintle, "Decolonizing the Smithsonian: Museums as

Published in the special issue: "De-Colonizing Art Institutions", *OnCurating*, 34, 2017,
forthcoming.

Microcosms of Political Encounter," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 121, No. 5, 2016, p.
1519.