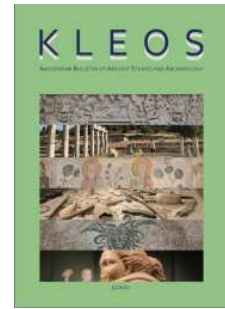




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Trailing Behind or Taking Strides? An Investigation into the Decolonisation of Archaeological Material in the Museum

Brodhie Molloy

ABSTRACT

Holding claim to “[...] two million years of human history and culture.”, the British Museum, UK, is an archetypal example of how powerful a museum can be in sharing stories.¹ The museum’s origins, however, are steeped in the complicity of British colonialism – noted as one of the three powerful enlightenment institutions, the museum’s collecting and display of archaeological material from colonised nations ultimately served imperialistic narratives. How can the museum and, more generally, those who are involved in the display of archaeological objects now begin to engage with this past? This paper uses the ‘Collecting and empire trail’ at the British Museum to critically discuss the benefits of a decolonial approach - rooted in an evolving, self-reflexive practice - to the display of archaeological materials. It reflects on the updated stories told to the public regarding the objects and how these can begin to appropriately address the colonial pasts of the museum’s collections.

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► [Profile page](#)

INTRODUCTION

Museums are more than glass cabinets.

Operating at the ‘intersection of scientific work and public display’, for many, museums offer one of the few opportunities to interact with archaeological material and the stories of the past they invoke.² Museums here hold a privileged position as key disseminators of historical narratives, or ‘meta stories’.³ ‘Meta-stories’ are the stories that materialise from the study of the past which contextualise and engage with the present society. This ultimately creates a level of responsibility on the behalf of museums regarding the stories the public receives and recalls from visiting. These stories are constituted by the archaeologists and

¹ British Museum 2021–e.

² Forgan 2005, 573.

³ Holtorf 2010.

curators that develop museum displays, prompting consideration to how our practice(s) influence these stories.

This notion, that Museums have a role in telling stories to society, is not a new revelation but instead can be traced as a fundamental factor in the establishment of the early European public museums. Recognised as one of the 'active tools' to have emerged from Empire, museums like the British Museum were designed to tell the stories that supported Empire's actions, and visually reinforce these with material culture.⁴ These often operated on a homogenised and formalised version of the past, exclusively from the Western perspective.⁵ Such narratives deprived the objects of their full stories and visitors of the ability to confront the activities and extent of colonialism.

Nowadays, the atrocities of Empire are undeniable. Yet, a 2014 YouGov poll found that 59% of the British public believe it is 'something to be proud of', with almost half of people thinking that overall, those who had been colonised were better off.⁶ As those who study the past, we know this to be historically untrue. The poll suggests an absence of narratives that explicate the activities and negative impacts of British colonialism. Engaging in a decolonial discourse can help illuminate and challenge these inherent colonial roots of British institutions, such as the early imperial museum's 'collecting' and displaying of archaeological materials.⁷

This paper reflects on the British Museum's position as an imperial institution in a post-imperial world, and its engagement with its colonial past. It explores why and how those involved in the display of archaeological material can begin to counteract the established narratives of the past through a decolonial approach. The approach encourages a re-learning of the knowledge and stories that were blind-sided or forgotten due to the systems and structures of colonialism. Seeking to disrupt the traditional roots of knowledge production, a decolonial practice promotes a shift in representation of those marginalised and silenced through history, and whom we deem an expert of such history(ies).⁸ This approach encourages museums to utilise their collections "[...] in self-reflexive ways as a contemporary resource to produce meaning." and contextualise the objects it owns.⁹ This is particularly relevant for the 'Collecting and empire trail' launched by the British

4 Sleeper-Smith, 2009; Giblin/Ramos/Grout, 2019, 471.

5 Ibid.

6 YouGov 2014.

7 Referring to the early – and problematic – practice of the sponsored acquisition of cultural material from colonised lands.

8 Hamilakis 2016; Akinruli 2019, 571.

9 Deliss 2015.

Museum in August 2020 that focused on “[...] how many objects in the Museum were acquired in the context of colonialism [...]”.¹⁰ The paper comments on the trail’s efforts to investigate how the Museum is addressing and communicating the narratives of its archaeological collections from the age of Empire.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS, CURATORS, MUSEUMS, AND THEIR PASTS

J. Symonds argues, it is appropriate to accept archaeological works as socio-political acts.¹¹ This demarks the subjective stance of the researcher, shaped by their cognitions and ontological processing, as well as contemporaneous accepted practice(s) in the field. The acceptance that, like all fields, archaeology cannot produce an objective truth does not negate their existence. Instead, it evidences the power productions of the past and its capacity to hold and encourage a decolonial perspective.¹² As the active agent in constituting different pasts in the present, the archaeologist, curator, and museum, and their subjective tendencies, help reveal understandings of the present environments within which they operate.¹³ Furthermore, archaeological material – and its assigned narratives – can serve contemporary agendas. The idea that the past is “[...] a constructed fiction that serves present interests [...]” is not a new phenomenon.¹⁴ Interest in archaeological preservation, regardless of era, maintains the continuous paradox of assigning value and meaning to assets for future generations – whether for holistic and political values or as part of sustainable development policy.¹⁵

It is important to acknowledge the ‘meta-stories’ that the study of archaeological materials manifests, and operates, within contemporary society.¹⁶ These are underlying story-frameworks that shape any archaeological narrative and make it significant to society, relating a given object to the present.¹⁷ These are palatable for society due to the intuitive connections that the study of the past can generate; association to being human, to a sense of belonging, and to recognising an alternative way of life.¹⁸ By cognising the affective and reactive nature of archaeological materials within society, we can examine how museums reverberate pasts that help inform societal perceptions of

¹⁰ British Museum 2021–f.

¹¹ Symonds 2019, 10.

¹² Knell 2007, 14.

¹³ Lucas 2018, 72.

¹⁴ Pinsky 1989, 89.

¹⁵ Harvey 2003, 473.

¹⁶ Holtorf 2010, 381.

¹⁷ Holtorf 2010, 383.

¹⁸ Holtorf 2010.

Empire.¹⁹

It is important to reflect on the position of museums as one of the three powerful enlightenment institutions – the census, the map, and the museum – noted to have consolidated early nationalistic and imperial agendas.²⁰ Furthermore, there is recognition in the academic world that the “[...] novel nineteenth-century colonial archaeology [...]” established a foundation for the ‘museum’.²¹ The development of archaeology in this age of cultural exploitation and reproduction established an inherent political core to archaeological museum display – which was so intrinsic that almost everyone was unaware of it.²² The ‘classificatory, geographic-demographic’ practice of said archaeologists fundamentally made it possible to assemble information and reproduce the idea of a colonised nation.²³ The museum has continued to act as an interface between archaeological research output and the thousands of visitors who attend.

Internationally recognisable, this paper looks at the British Museum which opened as the first national public museum of the world in 1759 and has continued to prosper in its display of archaeological material. Holding claim to “[...] two million years of human history and culture”, the British Museum, UK, is an archetypal example of how powerful a museum can be in sharing stories.

DECOLONIAL APPROACHES

The notion of post (about post-colonial) is indicative of a reality that is past colonialism whereas the discourse proposed in this paper, de-colonial, recognises the ongoing and contemporary nature of colonialism. Rather poignantly, as J. Pagán-Jiménez points out, many of the prominent postcolonial theorists tend to produce theories in a European and North American context.²⁴ Pagán-Jiménez’s research in Latin America led him to conclude that a post-colonial approach was not universally relevant. Highlighting that Latin Americans already practice knowledge production from their worlds and thus “have always had a voice”.²⁵ In this way, a postcolonial archaeology that attempts to “give back the past” is redundant.²⁶ Pagán-Jiménez’s discussion on Latin America also emphasises the reductive and static notion of ‘post-

19 Moser 2010, 22.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 178.

22 Ibid., 183.

23 Ibid., 185.

24 Pagán-Jiménez 2004, 209.

25 Ibid.

26 Shepherd 2007, 111.

colonial' itself. As many have critiqued, a post-colonial discourse is oxymoronic in the sense it implies the colonial is a thing of the past. On the contrary, colonialism has not ceased to exist, nor is it a linear and homogenous experience globally.²⁷ To counter this, Y. Hamilakis advocates for a shift from postcolonial discourse to 'decolonial archaeologies'- the nature of decolonialisation being a continual process, as opposed to an achievable target.²⁸ This removes the premise that there is a tangible end goal, instead reinforcing a reflexive and evolving practice. More importantly, such reflexivity prompts archaeologists and curators to continually decolonise their approaches, practices and ontological understandings and prompts thoughtful engagement with contested histories.²⁹

The discourse is also exploring how a decolonial approach manifests in the museum environment. Sleeper-Smith argues that museums should engage in the decolonial process by focusing on their self-presentation and preservation in the representation of pasts.³⁰ Her research focused on the display of indigenous communities in South and North American museums. It highlights the importance of multi-vocality in the re-representation of the museum's traditional narratives.³¹ The OF/BY/FOR ALL Change Network aims to advise cultural organisations on adopting the company's namesake for local communities.³² Working with the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, the organisation promotes the adoption of an agenda that no longer serves an institutional agenda, but puts '[...] collections, knowledge, and expertise [...]' to use where appropriate for the communities it serves.³³ The Weltkulturen Museum experimented with the introduction of an 'unfinished collection' that was designed to disrupt the traditional display of cultural materials.³⁴ By keeping the inventory of the exhibition open, visitors and contributors can continue to engage and explore the dynamic contexts of the objects on display.³⁵ This decentring of a homogenised or mainline narrative is synonymous with a decolonial approach.

Repatriation is a distinct discourse worth noting. L. Nilsson Stutz notes how repatriation can be crucial in the redefining of previously colonised nations and helps to restore their culture and

27 Pagán-Jiménez 2004; Hamilakis 2016.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.; Minott 2019, 564.

30 Sleeper-Smith 2009.

31 Sleeper-Smith 2009, 133.

32 Van der Vaart et al. 2021.

33 Van der Vaart et al. 2021, 135.

34 Deliss 2015, 33.

35 Ibid.

past.³⁶ They argue that archaeology should be more active in this process, having been “[...] an integral part of the colonialist project [...]”.³⁷ Stutz acknowledges that western archaeological and museum practices have not reacted with enough impetus.³⁸ Repatriation is a viable solution, but not necessarily a sustainable one. Many museums maintain a defence that by engaging in the repatriation process, it would set a precedent for more repatriations – acting as a domino effect, this would potentially be cataclysmic in reshaping and even destroying the structure of the institution.³⁹ Ultimately, this is something that would not be warmly received by museums’ respective institutions across the Northern Hemisphere. Regardless, legislation such as the British Museum Act 1963 (UK) vetoes the Museum’s ability to dispose of almost all its collections.⁴⁰ We must also consider that not all countries seek the repatriation and reconciliation process, and that it can be a traumatic experience.⁴¹ This is not to say we should not repatriate but acknowledges its inherent legal complexity, whilst being a consensual and representational process.

Symonds argues that archaeology’s messages must be more visible, and believes it is necessary to re-focus public consumption of what the discipline offers.⁴² In this sense, archaeology is required to re-assert its voice in the museum - and therefore in society – and effectively participate in heritage future-making.⁴³ Hicks suggests that adopting the practice of ‘Necrography’ – the recording or recognition of the loss of a past or meaning any object experienced when inherited by the British empire – can expose and better display the symbiotic relationship between early archaeological works and the museum.⁴⁴ Giblin et al. similarly suggest a commitment to museums exploring the “[...] critical histories of empire [...]’ related to objects in their collections.⁴⁵

Archaeology must remember it is not the sole keeper of the past. Archaeologists should not only be self-reflexive, but they must also be willing to ‘step back’ and acknowledge the value of

36 Nilsson Stutz 2007, 4.

37 Ibid, 1–2.

38 Ibid, 4.

39 Quntar 2017, 23.

40 Replacing the 1902 Act of the same name, the British Museum Act 1963 forbade the Museum from disposing of its possessions (apart from rare special circumstances). It also oversee the splitting on the Museum with the newly-independent Natural History Museum. See also UK Government, 1963; Hansard Parliament, 2021.

41 Hamilakis 2016, 681.

42 Symonds 2019, 6.

43 Ibid.

44 Hicks 2020, 236

45 Giblin et al. 2019.

indigenous and minority voices in the field.⁴⁶ N. Shepherd notes the necessity for a new level of critical reflection that grounds archaeological understanding of the past in archaeology's history, returning the past back to the people, by decentralising the role of the archaeologist.⁴⁷ This means inviting these voices outside the field to tell their objects' stories and can be achieved through museum engagement with, and platforming of, these communities. However, it is not always possible to connect with voices that have been lost to the past. Thus, a decolonial approach significantly benefits from decentralising the archaeologist or curator's narrative. This can be achieved through the elevation and support of indigenous and minority academics.⁴⁸ It also requires an acceptance and equality for 'archaeologists' or 'experts' that are not strictly academic.⁴⁹

CASE STUDY: 'COLLECTING AND EMPIRE TRAIL'

A way that we could better develop these connections with society is through readdressing the modus operandi of archaeology's dominant social platform – the museum. The role of the museum is especially powerful here as where it is noted that archaeologists do not own the past, museum institutions have a literal and consolidated ownership of the material that carries the past. For this paper, focus will be on the 'Collecting and empire trail' (hereafter trail) at the British Museum; a guided trail that highlights further information to the colonial histories of some of the objects in the museum. It's collections largely substantiated by resultant spoils of colonialism, the British Museum has continued to be at the centre of debate surrounding the presentation and retention of objects.

But how does the 'imperial' museum – an institution that has never been pre-colonial – successfully work to decolonialise it's position?⁵⁰ In August 2020, the museum launched its trail initiative with the aim to teach "[...] how colonial relationships shaped the British Museum's collection [...]".⁵¹ We can recognise this as the museum's attempt to begin the process of engaging with the colonial contexts of its collections.

Available online and in-person, it initially covered 15 objects in the museum's possession, highlighting their individual complex histories (figure 1).⁵² To follow physically, visitors navigate

⁴⁶ Shepherd 2007, 111.

⁴⁷ Shepherd 2007, 111.

⁴⁸ McGuire 2008, 37.

⁴⁹ Leone 2005; Hamilakis 2016.

⁵⁰ Minott 2019, 560.

⁵¹ British Museum 2021–b.

⁵² Ibid.

Learn how colonial relationships shaped the British Museum's collection in this object trail.

From around 1500 to the mid-20th century, a number of European countries established overseas empires – Britain's empire was the largest. The British Museum was founded in 1753: its history and collection are shaped by empire and the colonial exploitation of people and resources.

This trail highlights objects that were predominantly acquired during the age of empire and shows the different, complex and sometimes controversial journeys of objects that would become part of the Museum collection. Sometimes objects were acquired directly but often they were collected first by individuals, organisations or companies, passing through several owners before coming to the Museum.

15-object trail – this trail can be completed in a single visit and will take around 60–70 minutes. It takes in several different galleries which are on the Ground floor. When you visit the object in the gallery you'll find more information about how the Museum acquired it.

Three-object trail – this trail is ideal if you only have 30 minutes to spare.

Further objects will be added to this section over the next 12 months as the result of ongoing collaborative work and research.

Figure 1

Collecting and empire trail website description (after <https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail>).

themselves via trail icons on objects along the trail (figure 2). This experience is accompanied by a leaflet covering the information found in the trail displays alongside the respective objects (figure 2). The trail follows a generic format of a brief biography of the object and the subsequent story of how it came to the museum. This paper recognises three poignant matters with the trail: the choices (to date) made on object inclusion; the content of these new object descriptions; and the authorship and production process of the trail.

CHOICES

Since launching, the trail has had the addition of one new object – the Milk vessel from Somalia (figure 3).⁵³ This appears disproportional compared to the size of the museum. It is important to learn the biographies and extended histories of all the objects in the Museum's collection but, it seems the selection made for the trail is not representative of contemporarily contested and societally relevant objects.

The list of notable contested or 'complex' objects within the Museum's possession is extensive, and their histories reify the difficulties museums must overcome when serving multiple stakeholders (for example the legality in the acquisition of the Parthenon Marbles). However, the Benin Bronzes have received

⁵³ British Museum 2021–b.



The British
Museum

Collecting
and empire

Follow the trail



Figure 2

'Collecting and empire trail' icon found on objects part of the trail and leaflet (https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Collecting_and_Empire_object_trail_leaflet_British_Museum_2021.pdf).



Figure 3

Milk vessel from Somalia (https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Collecting_and_Empire_object_trail_leaflet_British_Museum_2021.pdf).

greater focus regarding their ownership over the past 12 months – with the (il)legality and horrors behind their acquisition story not as contested. This feels like a missed opportunity, as a collection of 900 objects, the story of the Bronzes clearly demonstrates the role of British colonialism in curating the museum's collections.⁵⁴ Such choices can ultimately only be understood and justified through dialogue from the curator(s), who are unknown. Furthermore, the application of additional information for every object in the museum's collection is simply unfeasible, especially with factors such as unknown provenances. It also highlights the limitations of the sector brought by a lack of staffing/funding and the resultant need to make refined choices on what to include.

It must be acknowledged that the trail's online version has a "Further reading" section that recognises the contested nature of both the above-mentioned objects (figure 4). There is a hyperlink that leads to the statements by the Museum on its position with each of the objects, and detailed object biographies. However,

⁵⁴ British Museum 2021–d.

Further reading

Read the latest information about the Parthenon sculptures, the Benin Bronzes and other objects that are subject to debate and requests for return to other countries on our [Contested objects from the collection page](#). You can also explore other histories of acquisition in [Collecting histories](#), or consult individual object entries in [Collection online](#).

hyperlinks do not work in real life and this information is not included on the trail's accompanying leaflet. Visitors are left unaware not only of these 'contested' and colonial origins, but also do not learn of the Museum's positionality and current efforts. This is especially disappointing as, whilst institutions in Berlin and Aberdeen announce decisions to return the Benin's in their possession, the British Museum continues to fail to truly vocalise it's contested history and acquisition story.⁵⁵

WHAT IS INCLUDED

The trail highlights new information about the objects and their biographies. The leaflet loosely explores the culpability of the Museum in the British Empire's colonial exploitation – but fails to elaborate what this 'exploitation' consisted of - that led to most of the Museum's collections (figure 5). This is the most fundamental failure that can be traced throughout the trail's original line-up.

The rhetoric of the trail's object descriptions and contextual text conflates all kingdom's and empire's endeavours with colonialism – seemingly attempting to contextualise the acquisition of the artefacts as only natural or normal human behaviour. Furthermore, it follows a tone that recognises colonial collection and acquisition as the acts of individuals. Noting famous British collectors of the 19th-century, the trail fails to expand on the history(ies) of the people who experienced colonialism and relate to the objects. For example, the description of the West African drum echoes this failure to expand on the deeper colonial context of the object's journey (figure 6). The trail gives a brief description of the drum's probable migration across the Atlantic on a slave ship, mentions the drum's function, then notes its journey through western hands to physician and collector Sir Hans Sloane in England (figure 6).⁵⁶ Many non-academics, and academics not in the field, are likely unaware of the extensive role Britain had in the Atlantic slave trade, especially as it does not feature in the national curriculum. The trail dedicates a section to Sloane and

Figure 4

'Further reading' section at the bottom of the British Museum's website version of the *Collecting and empire trail* (after ► <https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail>).

⁵⁵ Packard 2021.

⁵⁶ 21 to the below.

Exploring *Collecting and empire*

The British Museum was founded in 1753 and its history and collection are intimately linked to that of the British Empire. From around 1500 to the mid-20th century, a number of European countries established and maintained overseas empires – Britain's was the largest. A substantial part of the wealth of the British Empire came from the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial exploitation of people and resources.

This trail highlights objects predominantly acquired during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It shows the different, complex and sometimes controversial journeys of objects to the Museum. Often, objects were collected first by individuals or organisations, sometimes passing through several owners before coming to the Museum.

This trail takes in several galleries, most of which are on the Ground floor. Viewing all the objects, in the order listed, will take around 60–70 minutes. When you visit each object you'll find more information there about how the Museum acquired it.

Previous page: A sculpture from the Nereid Monument, Turkey, about 380 BC.

Dance costume (Bwaili ni Mwai), Kiribati, various dates 1982–2017.



Figure 5

Introduction to the *Collecting and empire* trail, page 2 (► https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Collecting_and_Empire_object_trail_leaflet_British_Museum_2021.pdf).



West African drum, collected in Virginia, 1700-1750

This wooden drum is the earliest African-American object in the British Museum. It was made by Akan people in West Africa over 300 years ago. The first enslaved Africans arrived in North America in 1619 and we assume the drum crossed the Atlantic aboard a slave ship, but this is not known for certain. Drums were played during these journeys and captives were forced to dance for exercise in order to keep them healthier amid the horrendous conditions. Around 1730, a Reverend Clerk acquired the drum in Virginia, then a British colony and now a state within the USA. The drum passed from him to Sir Hans Sloane in England where it became part of his collection, incorrectly recorded as a Native American drum. Recent scientific examination revealed that the main body of the drum is made from a variety of wood found in West Africa.

Figure 6

West African drum, collected in Virginia and its description at page 21 (after ► <https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail>; ► https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Collecting_and_empire_object_trail_large_print_guide_The_British_Museum_May_2021.pdf).

Sir Hans Sloane and the British Museum

In his will, Sloane, a wealthy physician, offered his entire collection to the public in return for a payment of £20,000 to his heirs. Sloane's collection, with several additional libraries and collections, became the foundation of the British Museum, which was established on 7 June 1753 by an Act of Parliament.

Sloane's career as a collector began in 1687 when he became physician to the Governor of Jamaica, then a British colony. Sloane worked as a doctor on plantations worked by enslaved people. With assistance from English planters and enslaved West Africans he assembled a collection of 800 plant specimens, animals and local tools and personal items. On returning from the Caribbean Sloane married an heiress to Jamaican sugar plantations worked by enslaved people, profits from which allowed him to greatly expand

his collections.

Room 1: Enlightenment

Puppets and masks from Java, 1700–1816

These objects were collected by Sir Stamford Raffles (1781–1826), a British colonial official. Between 1811 and 1816 Raffles was Lieutenant-Governor of Java, infamously known for authorising an attack on the most powerful Javanese court. During his time there, he amassed collections and reports on aspects of the island that appealed to early 19th-century European ideas about civilisation, particularly national history and antiquities. All of Raffles' papers were lost when the ship returning him to Britain in 1824 sank, so we will never know for certain how his objects were obtained. Stylistic features and the unused condition of the puppets and masks displayed here indicate that they were probably gifts or were purchased by Raffles, rather than being acquired through looting. Raffles' collection was

almost casualises his ownership of slaves, noting how this contributed to his success in building an expansive collection (see figure 7).⁵⁷ Explications on the context, purpose and origins of the Atlantic slave trade would be an easy and clear way to engage in these 'uncomfortable' histories and disseminate such knowledge with a significantly large audience.

A similar underplaying of the events in which these objects are contextualised can be seen with the information accompanying the Soup plate from China (figure 8). For this object, the information leaflet (figure 9) provides a short excerpt on The British East India Company and China, noting the relationship between the two had led to the First Opium War.⁵⁸ This records the events lightly, and illuminates how the trail's overriding matter-of-fact tone leaves a lot up to the audience's own understanding or further research. This is baffling as the information leaflet provides more specificities regarding the kind of wood the Shield from New South Wales (another trail object) was made from. By only mentioning events the museum does not appropriately contextualise the colonial entanglements of the objects.

Overall, the information provided by the trail, either as object descriptions or an information leaflet, fails to align the full narrative of how archaeologist, museum and colonising endeavours acted in a semiotic relationship to perpetuate a justified imperialist narrative. This is poignant as the trail was curated with the direct aim to contextualise the colonial histories of the museum's collections. Here, the trail's curators would benefit by adopting a Necrography approach.⁵⁹ This would demonstrate both a given object's pasts as part of colonialism,

Figure 7

Information on Sir Hans Sloane and the British Museum, pages 22-23 (► https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Collecting_and_Empire_object_trail_leaflet_British_Museum_2021.pdf).



Figure 8

Soup plate from China, 1740s (► <https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail>).

⁵⁷ British Museum 2021–c, 22.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁹ Hicks 2020.

whilst recognising that this entails a loss of its other pasts that curators and archaeologists are unable to necessarily comment on. Through failing to explicate how British institutions and the empire directly led to the collection of many of the objects on display, the trail ultimately rescinds a degree of culpability for the British's past and ongoing colonial impact. It is not objective to leave out the details and extent of British colonialism and results in a trail that appears to demonstrate the variety and breadth of items within the British Museum's collections rather than adding further contextualisation to the actual object or present narratives.

AUTHORSHIP - MADE BY: WHO KNOWS?

The trail is, past the point of having the British Museum stamp, authorless. The leaflet notes it is the product of "[...] ongoing research and collaborative work."⁶⁰ Without knowing the details and extent of such 'collaborative work' one can only assume that this trail is written from the view of the museum itself, and thus does not differ from the traditional institution-led dialogue which fundamentally opposes a decolonialising process.

This may seem an interesting point considering the British Museum's proclaimed title of encyclopaedic – as it fails to comprehensively provide the global narratives and stories they purportedly perpetuate. This is discipline-wide, R. McGuire highlighted, as the nature in which archaeology manifests follows a pattern of exclusion to non-professional communities.⁶¹ This engrained silo-ing of expertise towards the academic only serves a shoehorned agenda and limits the vibrancy of knowledge-sharing and cultural contact.⁶² By genuinely engaging with local or historically impacted communities in decentralising practices – from initial research stages through to dissemination and display within the museum – we can begin to open avenues and platform voices previously (and continually) marginalised or overwritten.

De-centralising the academic 'specialist', and thus decolonial practice, is exemplified by one of the objects on the trail's list – Dance costume from Kiribati, 1987–2017 (figure 10). The project description highlights the object was part of a co-curated project with members of the Kiribati community in the UK (figure 10).⁶³ For this project, members of the community were a prominent voice in the creation and development of the display which was completed with this costume in 2017. This object is demonstrative of the potential to actively engage and incorporate communities in the



Figure 9

Collecting and empire trail large print guide (https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Collecting_and_empire_object_trail_large_print_guide_The_British_Museum_May_2021.pdf).

60 British Museum, 2021–a.

61 McGuire 2008.

62 Matthews 2009, 80.

63 British Museum 2021–c, 33.



Dance costume from Kiribati, 1987-2017

This display was co-curated with members of the Kiribati community in the UK. In the Kiribati islands dance is a way of storytelling, remembering and passing on cultural knowledge. The community members were keen that dance should be a prominent element of this display. One of the participants, Victoria Burns, created the film nearby which shows a dance performance. When work began on this project during 2016 the Museum's collection did not include a complete dance costume, but only some of the elements that you can see here. The rest of the costume was acquired in 2017 through the contacts of the

Kiribati community. Some of the additional items were donated, others were newly commissioned and made in Kiribati especially for this display.

Figure 10

Dance costume from Kiribati, 1987-2017 and the provided description. Final (15th) object of initial trail 2020 (► <https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail>; ► https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Collecting_and_empire_object_trail_large_print_guide_The_British_Museum_May_2021.pdf).

learning of the past. It would be encouraging for the museum to not only continue with initiatives like this, but to also adopt this open collaboration for all its work – starting with the trail's description and narrative selections.

CONCLUSION

Today acting as community hubs, food banks, and vaccination centres (figure 11), museums continue to prove they are more than glass cabinets. Exploring the British Museum's 'Collecting and empire trail', this paper assesses the narratives constructed from archaeological remains in the imperial museum and their contemporary public dissemination. The trail is a positive step towards decolonising the museum, recognising this initial dialogue around the 'complex' histories of some of the objects within the Museum's collection.

We can take encouragement that the British Museum has begun to engage in these processes, whilst maintaining that there is still more work to be done. Greater transparency in relation to collaboration/curatorship of the trail would better inform our understanding of the choices made – as it continues to be narrated with no known authorship. Future updates should seek to include notoriously contested items like the Benin Bronzes that feature more prominently in society, arguably being poster-boy cases for the aspirations of the trail. Engagement with indigenous and marginalised communities is imperative and would provide an invaluable resource for illuminating other pasts of the objects, as demonstrated with the Kiribati community work. Fundamentally, archaeologists and curators are liable for the constituted pasts on offer to the public surrounding archaeological objects on display. Continuing to detach this notion from the 'complex' historical



Figure 11

Black Country Museum operating as a vaccine centre 2021 (► <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/health/coronavirus-covid19/2021/05/07/black-country-living-museum-to-only-give-second-dose-of-covid-vaccine-as-programme-moves-to-next-phase/>).

contexts does a disservice to not only the silenced voices of empire but also to the field's reputation as serving and educating society. Despite the critiques, the trail is a stride forward in the decolonising of the museum's archaeological collections. It is our responsibility to keep this process developing or, otherwise, face trailing behind.

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