

## **Decentering and Expanding the Museum: Embracing Practices Beyond the Euro-American Tradition**

### **1. Introduction**

As per the International Council of Museums' newly approved definition in 2022, several fundamental principles need emphasis in museum practice, such as inclusiveness, diversity, and participation (ICOM, 2022). However, traditional Euro-American museums have been criticized for their homogenization policies which often carry connotations of colonialism. Soares and Leshchenko (2018) rightly argue that the focus needs to widen by including non-Euro-American practices for a decentered expansion with decolonial objectives. This essay explores three primary objectives: firstly, identifying ways museums can reduce Eurocentrism by embracing non-Western cultural practices; secondly, analyzing examples from existing initiatives that incorporate culturally diverse art forms while discussing challenges like contextualization issues and lastly, underscoring the importance of fostering diversity and inclusivity within museum spaces.

### **2. Historical Context**

Museums have experienced various changes throughout history as societies develop unique approaches to collecting and presenting art or objects of significance. As Van Buren's (1922) article notes, wealthy individuals in ancient Greece or Rome exhibited sculptures and paintings across public sites such as gardens or theatres for educational purposes for the general public while demonstrating their wealth or influence within society.

In contrast, during the Renaissance period, publicly accessible museums had not been established yet, with valuable artworks being held within religiously affiliated institutions like monasteries or churches. Like ancient Greece and Rome, art collections during the Renaissance period were also meant to showcase the power of prestige of specific wealthy individuals (Genoways and Andrei, 2016). Nonetheless, the museums as people know them today were established during the era of Enlightenment. According to the British Library, it was a time of intense scientific, political, and philosophical debate that led to significant changes in European society. The Enlightenment was a period of significant change characterized by a departure from established customs and traditions towards new ideas such as scientific progress, exploration, individualism, and tolerance. These new ideas, coupled with advancements in industry and politics, were instrumental in ushering in the modern era (White, 2018). One significant outcome of this period was the transformation of the museum world into a tool for scientific inquiry. Collections were meticulously organized and documented using a rational classification system (Abt, 2006).

The establishment of the British Museum in 1753 is illustrative of the modern trend toward establishing public institutions. Hans Sloane, as reported by Boissoneault (2017), bequeathed his collection to the British Parliament with the request that they purchase it for £20,000 in order to establish a public museum that would be open to all, regardless of nationality or origin, and with free admission. The collection, which included ancient antiquities, natural specimens, and works of art from various regions of the globe, served as the basis for the British Museum.

Another significant example is the Louvre in France. The Louvre was initially a royal palace. However, during the French Revolution, "the National Assembly opened the Louvre as a museum in August 1793 with a collection of 537 paintings (Szalay, 2018)." Now, the Louvre has a massive collection of art and artifacts from around world, including ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman objects, and works of art from the Middle ages to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In contemporary times, the British Museum and the Louvre have emerged as significant tourist hotspots and cultural centers. Nevertheless, they have been subjected to scrutiny for their collections and displays, mainly concerning cultural appropriation, colonialism, and lack of representation of non-Western outlooks (Kreps, 2006). Consequently, many museums worldwide are now striving to expand their collections and introduce diverse practices and perspectives from beyond the Euro-American tradition while also seeking to decolonize their collections (Karp and Kratz, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, the museum was initially associated with the Western concept of rationality and scientific investigation, emphasizing the collection and classification of items from various parts of the globe. Unfortunately, this approach often resulted in the marginalization of non-Western societies and the procurement of objects through colonial methods. Consequently, several museums in Europe and North America are presently dealing with the difficulties of their collections' problematic histories and are attempting to incorporate more diverse and decolonized acquisitions (Abungu, 2019).

The problematic representation of colonialism is one of the significant issues with Euro-American museums. Many of these museums were established during the colonial era and have acquired objects through imperial means. This can perpetuate the narrative of colonialism and reinforce power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized (Vawda, 2019). Furthermore, the Euro-American museum has a history of excluding non-Western cultures, promoting the view of Western culture as superior and universal. Due to these problematic legacies, museums are under increasing pressure to address and acknowledge these issues. In addition, numerous organizations are implementing measures to return

artifacts to their countries of origin, form alliances with non-Western groups, and integrate a wide range of views and customs into their displays (Kreps, 2006). Through acknowledging the troublesome elements of Euro-American museums and striving for fairness, diversity, and inclusivity, these institutions can advance and achieve greater equality.

### **3. Decentering and Expanding the Museum**

Many museums are trying to handle the issues caused by colonialism and exclusion. As a result, an increasing trend can be witnessed, in which the museums have broadened and diversified their museum experience beyond Euro-American traditions. As mentioned multiple times earlier, one of the approaches that museums have often applied is the incorporation of non-Western practices, including community curation, indigenous curatorial methods, and oral histories.

Community curation refers to the involvement of specific communities in creating exhibitions and events. This approach has seen a rising popularity in the museum world. In addition, this method allows for a more inclusive and participatory approach to museum-making and can help address issues of representation and ownership (Debono, 2014). Similarly, indigenous curatorial practices prioritize the voices and knowledge of indigenous communities, challenging the dominant Western paradigm (Kreps, 2008). Oral histories are also an important tool for expanding and decentering the museum. By incorporating personal stories and memories into exhibitions, museums can create a more personal connection between visitors and the objects on display and provide a more diverse and inclusive representation of history and culture (Bornat and Thompson, 2017).

Many museums worldwide have adopted these methods and are endeavoring to broaden the scope and focal point of museums beyond the Euro-American model. An example of a museum that places significant emphasis on incorporating indigenous outlooks and customs into its exhibitions and activities is the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Established in 1989 as part of the Smithsonian Institution, the NMAI seeks to preserve and distribute the cultures, histories, and languages of indigenous communities throughout the Americas (Smith, 2005).

Ever since its founding in 1989, the NMAI has made it a top priority to integrate indigenous outlooks and customs into its displays and activities. A vital component of accomplishing this objective can be observed in the museum's architecture and exhibition planning. The structure of the museum, created by Douglas Cardinal, a Native American architect, was designed to reflect indigenous cultural values and design principles. The utilization of organic curves and natural materials in the building's construction produces a warm and reverent ambiance that

embodies the significance of the natural world to indigenous cultures (Ostrowitz, 2005). The museum's exhibitions are also curated with indigenous design principles in mind, employing circular arrangements and materials like wood and stone.

For modern-day museums like The National Museum of American Indian, incorporating native-based beliefs into event programming exhibitions has become an important goal, according to Onciul's (2017) report where NMAI worked alongside various indigenous communities on exhibition creation that would guarantee delegates from individual tribes' voices would be heard through representation in museum narratives. The NMAI places a high value on indigenous sovereignty and understands the necessity of confronting the historical impact of colonialism.

The museum has also seen the interconnectedness of language and culture. Therefore, the museum has put the utilization of indigenous languages and sharing of traditional knowledge as a top priority. They hired a group of indigenous educators as a part of the museum's education staff. These people have developed various programs that can reflect the diversity of indigenous cultures and traditions (West, 2004). In addition, the museum has also created a range of workshops, storytelling sessions, and cultural demonstrations for visitors. These interactive activities aim to provide a deeper understanding of indigenous cultures and histories (Lonetree and Cobb, 2008).

The Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm might sound unfamiliar to many people. The collection of this museum is mainly focused on contemporary art and culture. The Tensta Konsthall often works with artists from various backgrounds in order to promote a diverse representation of the community. The museum's establishment in 1998 was centered on creating an inclusive space that reflects the diversity of the local community (Ophrat, 2022). The museum has since focused on prioritizing non-Western and postcolonial perspectives, challenging the Eurocentric art world, and providing a platform for underrepresented voices and perspectives. The Tensta Konsthall's community engagement program is a significant initiative that prioritizes collaboration with local residents to co-create exhibitions and programs. The program is based on the idea that art should be accessible and relevant to the community, and that community members' voices and perspectives should be at the center of the museum's work (Golding and Modest, 2013). As a result, the museum has developed exhibitions that investigate topics such as cultural identity, migration, and displacement, and that represent the diversity of the region.

Artists and activists from underrepresented groups are given prominent display at this museum. Various exhibitions and events were hosted which included the works of people

who identify with underrepresented groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, women, and people of colour. The museum's programming is an attempt to encourage critical thought and discussion while also challenging accepted narratives. Apart from its initiatives that prioritize community engagement and non-Western perspectives, the Tensta Konsthall also places a significant emphasis on education and outreach (Samineh, 2019). The museum provides various programs for children and young people, such as after-school programs, workshops, and guided tours. Additionally, it organizes public events and talks, creating a platform for constructive discussions and critical thinking.

Incorporating inclusive and diverse practices can result in a more representative portrayal of culture and history in museums. These practices challenge the Euro-American dominant narrative and allow for the inclusion of underrepresented perspectives and voices. Nevertheless, implementing these practices may present challenges, such as questions regarding ownership, representation, and power dynamics. It is crucial for museums to handle these practices sensitively and collaborate with communities to honor and appreciate their knowledge and viewpoints.

#### **4. Challenges and Controversies**

While incorporating non-Western practices in museums is a promising approach to expand and decenter the museum beyond the Euro-American tradition, it has its challenges and controversies. One of the main challenges is the issue of cultural appropriation, mainly when non-Western cultures are used as inspiration for Western art and design (Coombe, 1993). This raises questions about power dynamics and representation, as Western institutions may be seen as exploiting the cultural heritage of non-Western communities for their gain. For example, the Benin Bronzes are a collection of bronze plaques and sculptures from the Kingdom of Benin in what is now Nigeria, and their presence in Western museums has not been without controversy. According to Greenberger (2021), "due to the vast number of Benin Bronzes in the collection of the British Museum, the museum has repeatedly been the subject of protests from activists, scholars, and artists who claim that the institution owns stolen property." The British Museum's and other Western institutions' purchase of such artefacts during the colonial period has been widely seen as an act of cultural appropriation and plunder. Calls for the return of these artefacts to their rightful owners have been persistent, shedding attention on persistent power disparities between Western museums and populations outside of the West (Machemer, 2022).

The need for proper representation is another difficulty. For instance, the debate over displaying Native American artefacts in American museums illustrates the problem of

accurate portrayal in exhibition halls (Scott, 2007). Unfortunately, many museums have exhibited these artefacts without consulting Native American communities or taking their viewpoints into account, leading to a lack of diversity in museum collections and the continuation of negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Native American history and culture (Lynch and Alberti, 2010). There should be no tokenization or reduction of non-Western voices to stereotypes if the museums are to reap the benefits of incorporating non-Western practices, which may give a more varied and nuanced picture of culture and history. This necessitates a continuous debate regarding representation and cultural sensitivity, as well as a dedication to working with non-Western populations in a respectful and collaborative way.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay has examined the expanding and decentering of museums by incorporating practices beyond those typically found in Euro-American traditions. Creating truly inclusive spaces necessitates decolonizing the current approach to museum practice and embracing these alternative perspectives. Museums must collaborate with non-Western communities to achieve this goal and prioritize their unique voices and experiences. There are various ways in which diversity can be promoted in museum programming - including expanding community engagement initiatives or incorporating indigenous curatorial methods - but ultimately, embracing non-Western knowledge systems is at the core of moving beyond restrictive Euro-American models to create a more equitable space reflective of the shared humanity with rich complexities.

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