

# The Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums: Why We Need to Talk About It

Museums, revered as sanctuaries of cultural heritage, house a treasure trove of art that captivates our imaginations and transports us through time. However, beneath the alluring façade of these institutions lies a complex and often overlooked narrative—the colonial story of the art within their walls.



## The Whole Picture: The colonial story of the art in our museums & why we need to talk about it by Alice Procter

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For centuries, museums have been shaped by the colonial powers that established and controlled them. The acquisition of art from colonized territories was often driven by a desire to assert dominance and display the supposed superiority of European culture. This process of collecting and displaying art was not simply a neutral act of preservation; it was an act of power and control.

## The Colonial Gaze

The colonial gaze, a perspective shaped by the power dynamics of colonialism, has profoundly influenced the way that art from colonized cultures is presented and interpreted in museums. This gaze often exoticizes and decontextualizes non-Western art, reducing it to mere curiosities or objects of aesthetic appreciation.

Historically, museums have tended to focus on the artistic achievements of dominant cultures while marginalizing the art of colonized peoples. This has resulted in a skewed representation of global art history, perpetuating narratives that privilege certain cultures and perspectives over others.

### **Hidden Histories and Silenced Voices**

The colonial story of art in museums goes beyond the mere physical presence of objects. It also encompasses the hidden histories and silenced voices of the people whose cultures have been appropriated and marginalized. Indigenous perspectives, for example, have often been ignored or misrepresented in museum collections and exhibitions.

By failing to acknowledge the colonial context in which art was acquired and displayed, museums perpetuate a sanitized and incomplete history. This omission erases the experiences and struggles of the people who created these works, obscuring the true complexities of their cultural heritage.

### **The Need for Dialogue and Inclusivity**

In the wake of growing awareness about the colonial legacy of museums, there is an urgent need for dialogue and inclusivity. Museums must take an active role in acknowledging and addressing the colonial biases that have shaped their collections and practices.

This process involves engaging with diverse communities, listening to their perspectives, and working collaboratively to develop more inclusive and representative exhibitions and educational programs. By fostering a dialogue about the colonial past, museums can create a more equitable and just space for the appreciation and understanding of global art.

## **Decolonizing the Museum**

Decolonizing the museum is an ongoing process that requires museums to critically examine their collections, practices, and narratives. This can involve:

- \* Repatriating objects that were acquired through unethical means \*
- Reinterpreting collections through a decolonial lens \*
- Collaborating with communities from which the art originated \*
- Diversifying museum leadership and staff to reflect the diversity of the communities they serve

By embracing a decolonial approach, museums can move beyond their colonial past and become more inclusive and equitable institutions that truly represent the diversity of human creativity.

## **Educational Imperative**

Museums have a vital educational role to play in shaping how the public understands the colonial story of art. By incorporating the colonial context into their educational programs, museums can help visitors:

- \* Understand the complex power dynamics that have shaped museum collections \*
- Critically engage with the narratives presented in museums \*
- Develop a more nuanced understanding of global art history \*
- Recognize the importance of diversity and inclusivity in museum representation

Through educational initiatives, museums can empower visitors to be more informed and critical consumers of cultural heritage, challenging colonial legacies and fostering a more just and equitable future.

The colonial story of the art in our museums is a complex and challenging one. It requires us to confront the legacies of colonialism and the ways in which they have shaped our understanding of art and culture. By acknowledging and addressing these biases, museums can become more inclusive and representative institutions that truly celebrate the diversity of human creativity.

Unveiling the colonial story of art is not about erasing the past but about understanding it more fully. It is about giving voice to silenced histories and creating a more equitable and inclusive space for the appreciation and understanding of global art.

As we move forward, it is essential that museums embrace the principles of dialogue, inclusivity, and decolonization. By working together, we can create museums that are truly representative of the diverse world we live in and that inspire future generations to embrace a more just and equitable future.



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