

From the Universal Museum to Critical Museology (online, 21–22 Nov 25)

Leuphana University Lüneburg / University of Ghana (online), Nov 21–22, 2025

Deadline: Aug 31, 2025

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From the Universal Museum to Critical Museology: Museum Histories and Future Perspectives.

An online conference of the “Material Migrations” project at Leuphana University Lüneburg and the University of Ghana.

Concept and organization: Gertrude Aba Mansah Eyifa-Dzidzienyo (University of Ghana) and Vera-Simone Schulz (Leuphana University Lüneburg / KHI Florenz, MPI).

The history of the museum as an institution is deeply intertwined with broader socio-political developments, evolving from private collections of the elite to public spaces of knowledge dissemination and cultural representation. However, the universal museum was far from neutral. It was closely linked to colonial expansion, with European powers amassing vast collections from territories across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania, and beyond. Museums became spaces where colonial conquests were prepared, accompanied, and justified, as artifacts were classified, studied, and exhibited within racist and pseudo-scientific frameworks. This practice reinforced Eurocentric narratives of progress and 'civilization' while rendering societies across the globe as objects of study rather than active participants in history. Western museums, which house a significant portion of their collections from colonial acquisitions, continue to face calls for restitution and repatriation of ancestral remains, cultural belongings, and artifacts that are as canonical as they are contested, such as the Parthenon marbles or the Benin artifacts.

The rise of critical museology in the late 20th and early 21st centuries challenges these foundational assumptions of the universal museum. This approach interrogates the power structures underlying museum practices, advocating for more inclusive, self-reflexive, and participatory modes of engagement. Museums increasingly address their colonial legacies by collaborating with Indigenous and marginalized communities, incorporating alternative knowledge systems, and rethinking curation beyond Western epistemologies. Restitution movements have gained momentum, prompting institutions to return objects to source communities or to develop co-stewardship models that recognize shared ownership and interpretive authority. At the same time, concepts of 'shared histories' and 'shared heritage' are being questioned as they often perpetuate asymmetric power relations (see https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/sharedhistory_keynote_owuor).

This online conference of the "Material Migrations" project, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, welcomes proposals for 20 minutes papers on any of the above-mentioned issues, on the his-

tory of museums, individual museums, historiographical or methodological approaches, collection items, biographies of objects, questions of display, or exhibition models beyond the museum. Contributions to museums as colonial institutions, not least also regarding their architecture and contemporary re-imaginings of museums, including new architectural approaches, are equally welcome. We also invite proposals that deal with participatory practices, the active involvement of local communities, museums concerning social justice, strives towards "new relational ethics" (Sarr/Savoy 2018) and approaches to museums that move away from Western-centric models towards institutions that genuinely reflect local contexts. We welcome contributions from museums in urban contexts and rural museums, as well as mobile museum approaches and digital museum models, and we invite scholars, artists, curators, museum professionals, and cultural practitioners to send us their paper proposals with topics across time and space.

Please send your abstracts (300 words maximum), a brief bio, and the information from which time zone you will participate during the conference dates to vera-simone.schulz@leuphana.de by August 31, 2025.

Reference:

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