# 100 Histories of 100 Worlds in one Object

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Report by: Mirjam Brusius, Deutsches Historisches Institut London

Workshop: "100 Histories of 100 Worlds in one Object"

Concept and Convenor: Mirjam Brusius (German Historical Institute London). Collaborators: Forum Transregionale Studien and Max Weber Foundation in co-operation with the GHIL, University College London (Alice Stevenson, Subhadra Das), and the University of the West Indies, Mona (James Robertson). Funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), Germany.

[report of the organizer]

The reputation of Jamaica as a tropical paradise is so engrained that it does not immediately register as an ideal meeting venue for a workshop on colonial collecting. The images that spring to the minds of many are of beaches and reggae music. Jamaica, however, is a former colony of the British Empire. It is also here that the kernel of London's British Museum and Natural History Museum collection was compiled by Sir Hans Sloane in the eighteenth century. The transatlantic slave trade provided the infrastructure that allowed Sloane and his European contemporaries to build their collections, and supplied specimens for Sloane and others, as James Delbourgo has compellingly shown in his book "Collecting the World. The Life and Curiosity of Hans Sloane" (Penguin 2016). It is thus no coincidence that our workshop took place at the University of West Indies (UWI Mona) campus in Kingston; formerly a plantation site and graveyard for enslaved people. We, an international and diverse group of researchers, curators, activists, artists, and heritage stakeholders from fifteen countries mainly from the 'Global South', experienced the site as multi-layered, inextricably and perennially linked to colonial trauma and violence. During the workshop we engaged with heritage professionals and explored new avenues for developing stories about museum objects with each other. How many stories can one object contain?

By shifting the geographical focus to a former colony and choosing Kingston as a venue my hope as the organizer was to find new pathways and avenues to these troubled histories in both a metaphorical but also a physical and material sense. Where are the stories of museums objects presented as seen by people who once used them? Where is indigenous knowledge presented; who is at the centre of museum narratives, and who on their margins? How is knowledge about museum objects informed by colonial collecting practices; and how is this context presented in museums today?

We met under the premise that the vestiges of empire extend beyond standard conventions of physical control and coercion. In Europe's museums, empire persists and proliferates in the present through material representations and celebrations of the past. Colonial exploration is still largely rendered as a triumphalist and heroic narrative, leaving little room for alternative interpreta-

tion. Museums, however, have a responsibility. The objects they contain play a crucial role in producing concepts of ethnicity, gender, class, and racial identity. They impact how audiences perceive not just artefacts in public life, but history itself. What if important aspects of history are eradicated? What if these legacies persist in ongoing global injustice and do not just lie in the past? What if nations and communities desperately want some objects to be returned? Not least in light of the repatriation debate, all workshop papers made clear that the ways in which objects are currently contextualized in many museums warrants urgent intervention.

We took Neil MacGregor's successful programme on BBC Radio 4 and the subsequent book "A History of the World in 100 Objects" (Penguin) as a starting point (both were published in 2010). The broadcast reached new audiences with the ambition to provide a global outlook and to present history through the lens of 100 objects. But the argument had its flaws. The programme was seen by some as a prime example of exclusion. Colonialism had ultimately produced not just inequalities of power but also a distorted view of history, and the programme was silent about the controversy raging over repatriating artefacts, and almost completely ignored the provenance of objects. Instead, it reinstated the idea of a 'view from nowhere' and everywhere at the same time. It presented the museum as place to see the world, yet without reflecting on how the institution itself obtained and reframed the objects in order to create its own seemingly universal narrative.

Nearly ten years after the programme's release, we returned to the subaltern voices it had left out. But unlike the museum objects now in London, we also 'returned' to Kingston as an original site of collecting to make the point that one object in fact contains "100 histories of 100 worlds".

The speakers presented new methods, approaches, and formats to achieve more than an alternative history of the British Museum. Instead, they worked towards a multilateral fusion of object histories and presented legacies in museums and their collections as seen by contributors from the 'Global South'. Doing more than filling a research gap they presented a strong intervention in the current link between modernity, scholarship, and museums that dominates the Western narrative. They thereby developed a new vocabulary and discourse for an ongoing debate.

For the workshop, participants picked an object from the British Museum podcast and presented ideas on how its narrative could be expanded through new stories (and often also new objects, as shown by the artist Rachael Minott), moving beyond it in material, archival, and philosophical terms. What can be said about British Museum attractions such as the Rosetta Stone – on which Heba Abd El Gawad spoke –, the Benin plaques – discussed by Sani Yakubu Adam –, the Gweagal Shield – put forward by Leah Lui-Chivizhe –, and Islamic talismans – as discussed by Rachel Engmann – by people from the countries who once owned them, or still use them (or would, if they were around)? To what extent do – as Subhadra Das pointed out – the Parthenon sculptures, or – as Alice Stevenson and Mirjam Brusius showed – Egyptian and Mesopotamian 'treasures' represent largely unquestioned ideologies about race and difference that ultimately imply that (white) Europeans are superior, and why is this historical context not explained on museum labels? Drawing on approaches in anthropology and other fields, all speakers worked under the premise that an object's original function and its later (colonial) appropriation are integral parts of an object's biography. Such functions were often erased through its journey into the museum, and replaced by a 'European version' of the story.

Many papers, including papers regarding objects across the globe from New Zealand, Namibia to

Mexico presented by Maia Nuku, Golda Ha-Eiros, Jonathan Fine, and Laura Osorio, shared one concern: the relationships between objects and the people, who care(d) for or about them. Indeed, the scarcity of attempts to illuminate the stories of people and (often ongoing) local practice in relation to objects is troubling. Instead, fixed in a postcolonial context, imperial vision underlies the master narratives of many European museums. Depending on their colonial past, their history has long been told as a continuing narrative of Europe's involvement in various regions of the world. This one-dimensional narrative was perpetuated by the 'two-dimensional' documents in archives that surround these objects. They are rarely neutral in value. Institutionally managed documents, practices, and ideologies thus often fail to give credit to engagement with the material past outside disciplinary frameworks, which museums often rely on. A collection of 'alternative object histories' (used here to indicate something deviating from the dominant, not from the 'normal') must therefore also go beyond established academic and curatorial approaches in order to address the absence of stories and people that remain invisible in archives. Addressing the functions objects had, or indeed still have, papers successfully showed how excluded voices can be empowered to tell their own histories beyond these frameworks. How can 'indigenous archives', oral histories, social media, personal memories, fiction, poetry, performance, photographs, and artworks present alternative 'counter-archives' to construct new stories about objects?

Many presenters thus used a more inclusive range of philosophies that might inject a much-needed critique into a discourse dominated by Western-style scholarship. Several papers, including those by Siriporn Srisinurai and Latika Gupta on collections in Thailand resp. the Himalayas addressed local resistance to colonial collecting and preservation practices, or the aftermath of scientific exploration, exploitation and slavery (as mentioned by Jean-Sébastien Guibert). Others showed how Western disciplines themselves, for example, the colonial field sciences of anthropology and archaeology promoted and underpinned ideologies of human variation and 'race', and vice versa. Several talks alluded to the 'divide and rule' approach of museums: by neatly separating and 'handpicking' certain ethnic groups, they erased others from their not so universal narrative to make it their own, ignoring that both objects and people were, in reality, rarely stable, but in constant transition and movement.

Doubts were certainly addressed too. Could an entirely new History of the World be told through a certain number of objects at all? The concept as such, a highly reductive and yet, at the same time, seductive idea used by many since, deserves to be critiqued. As has been the case in India, the '100 Objects model' can be deployed at a time of vehement nationalist resurgence, a recurring theme in our discussion. This raised more general and important questions about the role of Western museums in shaping museological practices elsewhere, and the format we seek to pursue with our own work. Our 'new histories' must be not just different methodologically and multilingual, but also dynamic and open for additions and narratives that others might want to add in future. As a next step, the project therefore aims for an open and multiformat approach (for example, a website and blog with stories, podcasts, an open access book publication and/or a collaborative re-display).

The discussion frequently returned to the increased pressure put on museums such as Berlin's Humboldt Forum to engage with the more uncomfortable parts of their collection histories, and recent debates surrounding France's plans for repatriation as announced by President Emmanuel Macron. With several curators on board, including those involved in projects at the British Muse-

um and the Humboldt Forum, how can our project advance conversations about the 'difficult' aspects of their collection histories? If objects are repatriated, how do origin communities deal with the 'poisoned' history that adheres to these objects? And how can they deal with the void if no repatriation takes place to start a process of healing? Many agreed that the issue of who to return the objects to, for example, if nationalism is on the rise, remains problematic.

Even if all of this makes a strong intervention with new perspectives from a truly diverse group of people extremely timely, institutional barriers and ethnic discrimination in the museum and academic sector remain high. We therefore operated with the ultimate goal of supporting the democratization of often exclusive museum spaces. This would seek to recognize and empower diverse ethnic audiences and their material past. The discussion, in other words, also concerned the role of museums in the multicultural societies of tomorrow. How can museums respond to the demands of those who ask for new representations that reflect different senses of belonging and inclusion? How can they open up their complex collection histories by displaying the objects in more inclusive ways? Finally, how could these interventions contribute to diversifying not only the visitors to museums, but also those who would like to work in and about them, and are often not given the chance?

Yet legacies of colonialism, e.g. visa rejections or lack of reliable internet access, also became a practical hindrance and thus pertinent in the workshop planning itself. Diversifying is a challenging task and requires listening, empathy, patience, and stamina. It also relies on the support of those with privilege and power, and on funding bodies and institutions who recognize the urgent need to decentralize and shift power structures in research and curating, in particular, in the name of 'decolonizing the museum'.

As institutional barriers persist and many excluded voices are still not being heard the question arises of how successfully the project itself will manage to plug into the museum landscape, public discourse, and mainstream media as a counternarrative to McGregor's own project. A different way to ask this question is: how willing are institutions to put more care into people, rather than objects? And if people, who gets to speak? How willing are they to move beyond pure 'object fetishism' and the Western preservation paradigm? As one of the participants, Golda Ha-Eiros, a curator from Namibia, movingly put it: in a German museum storage the object is just a number, in Namibia it has meaning to people.

The full programme can be found here: https://arthist.net/archive/22225

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