

Objects of Decolonization

The Social Role of Museums in Leading Public Discussion

Cesare Cuzzola

“Is the British Empire still relevant today?” asked one of the comment boards from *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*, a 2017–18 co-curated temporary exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG), United Kingdom (fig. 1). “The British Empire was a symbol of slavery and belief in a ‘divine right’ to conquer” said one of the transient responses on the white board. “We conquered the weak!!” someone else retorted (fig. 2). Can an exhibition that tackles sensitive issues also bridge divides? And what is the role and impact of museum collections in socially purposeful exhibitions?

In their seven-year strategy document released in 2016, Birmingham Museums Trust (which includes, among several other museums, BMAG) stated that their vision for the next hundred years will “reflect Birmingham to the world, and the world to Birmingham” and will “embed community engagement and participatory practice.”¹ This, along with the institutional values

of “Inclusivity” and “Working Together,” led me to explore its current projects and analyze them under the lens of socially-engaged museum practice. As a doctoral student in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, my dissertation research focuses on exploring the role of material culture in values-led projects in museums, making BMAG an excellent case study for looking into how the museum is using its collection to tackle contemporary issues. I have conducted interviews with visitors, co-curators, and staff members to explore the interpretation and reception of museum collections in exhibitions with a distinct focus on social impact.

Museums have the potential to be platforms of empowerment and places of productive discussion, not simply for the sake of diversifying displays, but to proactively redress their problematic history and reflect on the impact of their current practices. Through the lens of *The Past is Now*, I will argue that to do so requires having carefully considered guiding principles, embracing

¹ Birmingham Museums Trust, *Seven-Year Plan: 2016-2023* (Birmingham: Birmingham Museums, 2016).

Fig. 1. *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK. On the wall at the back, the artwork; on the sides and in the middle of the room, display cases with objects from the collection.

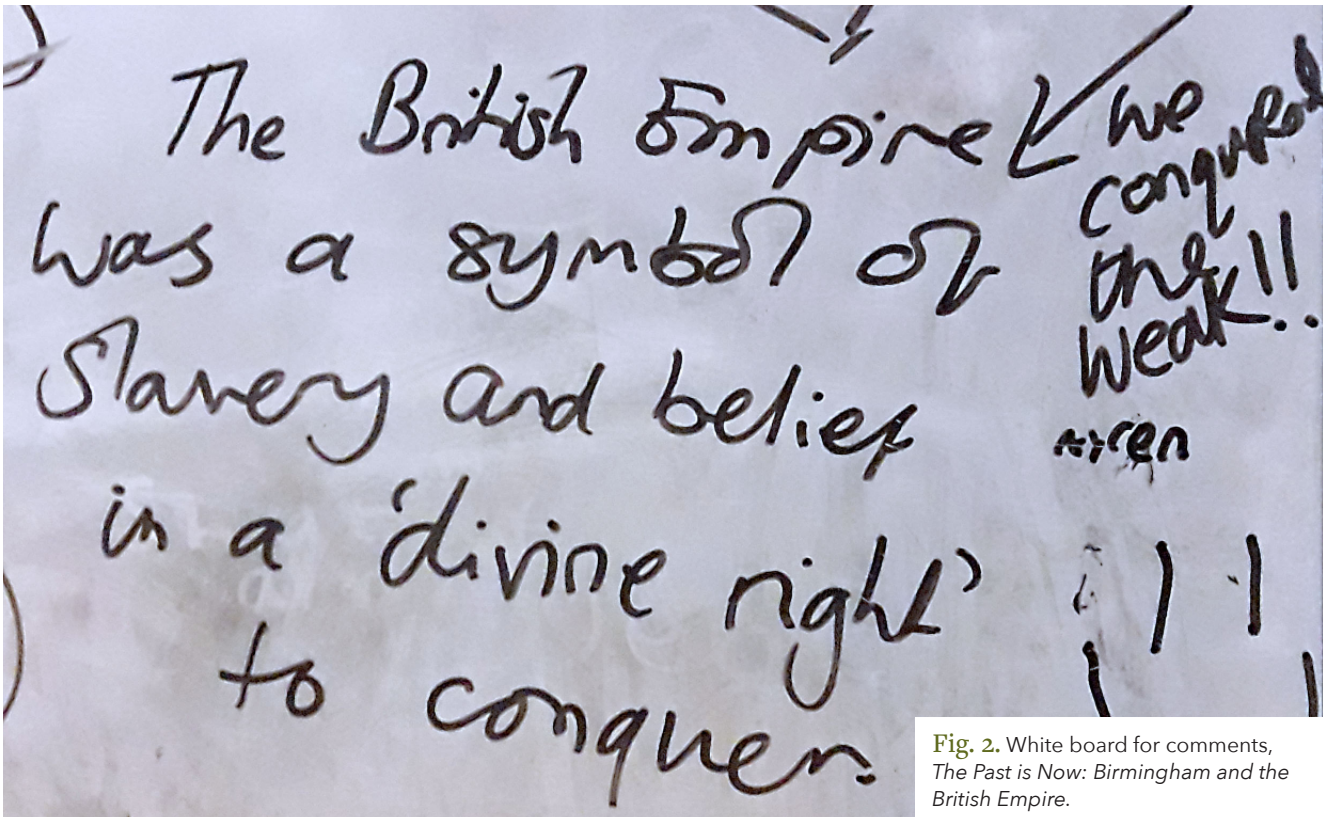


Fig. 2. White board for comments, *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*.

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dissent from the outset, and considering the impact of objects (as well as ethical object interpretation) on the public.

The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire, one of the exhibitions I have selected for my research, aimed to tell the story of the British Empire in Birmingham from the perspective of the colonized, instead of the colonizer.² The exhibition explored different themes related to the Birmingham and the British Empire; it included longer text panels for each of its themes, as well as individual labels for the artifacts and artwork. Themes included capitalism, the environment, colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain, eugenics, gun manufacturing, Kenyan independence,

2 Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott, “Detoxing and Decolonising Museums,” in *Museum Activism*, eds. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2019), 25–35.

representation, and Indian independence. Each of these themes was explored through related objects and images.

The exhibition opened with a reflection on the approach adopted by the team chosen to create it. BMAG purposefully decided not to separate the voice of the museum from that of the activists, to avoid undermining the authority of the activist voice by presenting it as an alternative or somehow less important perspective. The introductory panel (fig. 3) clearly states the intent of the exhibition: exploring stories about the British Empire and their connection to Birmingham from the perspective of Women of Colour, emphasizing that these stories can be told from multiple perspectives. The panel also included a glossary of terms, such as, for example, “The British Empire,” “Colonise,” and “People of Colour.”

Born out of the Change Makers programme (an Art Council England-funded project aimed at “increasing the diversity of senior leadership in art and culture”),³ led by Sara Wajid (who was then Head of Interpretation at BMAG), the exhibition was shaped as a collaboration between museum staff at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and six co-curators, who were recruited to participate in this project. Two of the co-curators, textile designer Shaheen Kasmani and “artist” Aliyah Hasinah, had already been part of an earlier Birmingham-based initiative known as Decolonise not Diversify. Researcher and writer Sumaya Kassim, graphic designer Abeera Kamran, writer Mariam Khan, and cultural activist Sara Myers completed the team of co-curators tasked with reinterpreting objects from the museum collection and telling the story of

3 Arts Council England, “Change Makers,” *Arts Council England*, December 20, 2017, available at: <https://artscouncil.org.uk/funding/change-makers/>.

Fig. 3. The introductory panel to *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*. Notice the glossary on the right-hand side column of the panel.

the Empire in Birmingham from their own perspective. The exhibition was also part of Story LAB, a gallery space at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery where more experimental practices are tested before being incorporated more permanently in the museum space. As well as engaging with their BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic audience)⁴, the team used Story LAB as a space to explore how to tell stories of the Empire with a different voice – that of Women of Colour with different kinds of professional expertise, as well as extensive knowledge of activist practices and decolonial discourse.

A Space for Dissent, a Space to Feel Heard

When putting together the planning team behind the exhibition, co-curators were selected among self-identified activists with existing expertise and interest in decolonization practices. By selecting individuals already versed in institutional critique and who were ready to question established museum practices, the project took an overtly non-neutral position on the subject. Since part of the institution’s objective with *The Past is Now* was to start to decolonize their practice, staff worked in collaboration with co-curators to challenge the main narrative of the British Empire, one that is historically embedded in the museum. This approach, however, was not adopted simply to disrupt or critique current museum practices. As the exhibition team focused on providing the perspective of the colonized on the Empire, *The Past is Now* aimed to provide a space where BAME visitors could feel represented. In the words of Rachael Minott, curatorial research lead for the project:



⁴ Terminology used in the United Kingdom to refer to people from a non-white ethnic background.

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I know the exhibition's purpose was to engage BAME audience, but realistically what that meant was that [the team] wanted to create an exhibition where BAME visitors particularly would come and feel heard, like their perspective was being presented, rather than violence.⁵

At the same time, because of the nature of the exhibition, interviews with visitors showed how the themes it explored resonated with issues beyond the walls of Birmingham Museums. This was the case for the cabinet focusing on Joseph Chamberlain, mayor of Birmingham between 1873 and 1875, a notable historical figure still commemorated today. The

⁵ Rachael Minott, personal communication with author, October 16, 2018.

exhibition discusses the role he played in the destabilization of South Africa and the second Anglo-Boer War after his appointment as Colonial Secretary in 1895. As articulated by two young visitors:

This [exhibition] is important...and good that it's happening. We both live in Oxford, it's where we study, and it's still a big issue – like for the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College.

Their comment referred to the “Rhodes Must Fall” protest movement which originally called for the removal of the statue commemorating Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and later spread to other universities, including Oriel College at University of Oxford.⁶ Cecil Rhodes, 19th-century British businessman and politician, has become a symbol of colonial oppression, due to his imperialist beliefs and policies as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. Rhodes Must Fall focused initially on the removal of the statue as a symbolic call for “decolonization” of higher education. With decolonization becoming an increasingly prominent theme in contemporary museum practice – now officially one of the emerging museum trends for 2019 identified by the American Alliance of Museums – the impact of campaigns such as Rhodes Must Fall cannot be ignored. How can a museum create a platform where discussion can bridge divides? Giving space for other perspectives to be told in the museum is an important step in recognizing that museums should stop hiding behind non-existent impartiality.⁷ Particularly when it comes to the museum leading and welcoming discussion, the museum has a

⁶ Rhodes Must Fall Movement, Oxford, *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (London: ZED Books, 2018).

⁷ Robert R. Janes, “The End of Neutrality,” *Informal Learning Review* 135 (November/December 2015), 3–8.

responsibility to guide and assess it, rather than simply providing a neutral space for purposeless disputes. As explained in the introductory panel of the exhibition, contemporary museums are no longer seen as spaces of undisputed authority over culture. Rather, they are often recognized as spaces where certain narratives can be contested.⁸ Emerging bodies of literature have acknowledged the value and power of museums not simply as a reflection of society, but as agents of change.⁹ *The Past is Now* told stories that are relevant to a more diverse range of people, and questioned old paradigms about museums as institutions. It proactively involved individuals who were already critical of museum practices to co-curate the exhibition, demonstrating an openness to contestation.

The Potential of Objects

As mentioned earlier, *The Past is Now* was set up as part of Story LAB, an experimental gallery space for testing creative museum practices. The idea of a museum laboratory is particularly fascinating for its potential to use material resources to effect change in society. In his article “Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood and the Governance of the Social,” sociologist Tony Bennett describes how museums, much like laboratories, can be seen as “places in which new forces and realities are constructed” and where objects, detached from their “natural” environment, are housed and manipulated.¹⁰ Contemporary museums have therefore often used collections for new

“civic purposes,”¹¹ so that objects themselves can actively shape or influence the social. Objects are not simple vessels of information when displayed in a museum; their existence is not limited to their label. Especially in the case of *The Past is Now*, several layers of interpretation exist for each object, as not only do visitors have heterogenous reactions, but the creation of the exhibition itself is based on a multiplicity of perspectives.

Objects are a way in which museums can create a meaningful connection with visitors. As Rachael Minott explained:

Museums are object-based and so the stories are object-focused; the role we have is to find out how certain objects relate to people and how they are the conduit for the narrative we want to tell.¹²

Museum collections can engender deep reflection and powerful responses in visitors. However, as Sumaya Kassim, one of the co-curators for *The Past is Now*, pointed out to me: “the more you imbue the object with power, the less people matter.”¹³ Museums should not be object-driven, but they are object-based: how do we harness the power of those objects and use it to engage in moral, political and social discussions? *The Past is Now* included three Kukri and Sinie machetes as part of the display on Kenyan Independence. They were confiscated from Kikuyu soldiers in the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–60) in Kenya, a conflict involving members of the Kikuyu community and colonial settlers, which was quashed by the British and resulted in many Kenyans being sent to concentration camps. Next to them, a letter from the

8 Laurence Gouriévidis. *Museums and Migration: History, Memory and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge), 2014.

9 Christina Kreps, “Foreword,” in *Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue: Selected Practices from Europe*, eds. S. Bodo, K. Gibbs and M. Sani (London: MAP for ID Group, 2009), 4–5.

10 Tony Bennett, “Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood and the Governance of the Social” in *Cultural Studies*, 19, no. 5 (2005): 521–47.

11 Ibid.

12 Rachael Minott, personal communication with author, October 16, 2018.

13 Sumaya Kassim, personal communication with author, November 12, 2018.

Fig. 4. January 2019: on the left, the panel from *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* about Joseph Chamberlain. On the right, the permanent display in the main social history gallery.



BMAG archives describes the knives as a potentially “amusing addition” to the museums collection. As a visitor articulated in an interview:

even more unsettling [than the knife] is that letter that goes with it and the idea that at the time you could write it, that the blood-stained knives would be an ‘amusing addition to the collection....’ The use of that word ‘amusing’ really brings home the climate of normalization and trivialization.

Providing the context for these objects to be read through a decolonial lens is one of

the ways in which museums could address their problematic history and reflect more critically about the past.

Conclusion

The Past is Now clearly shows how it is possible to open a conversation by having institutional guiding principles, embracing dissent from the outset, and considering the power of objects. The guiding principles of the museum, especially around inclusion and the role of co-production, created the right circumstances for a project such as *The Past is Now* to be executed. By conceiving the temporary exhibition as a co-curation,

and targeting individuals who are experts in decolonial practices and institutional critique, the museum welcomed dissent as a way to introduce new perspectives and new stories in the exhibition space. Finally, objects were able to be re-contextualised, not as vessels of information, but as entities with different levels of interpretations. Most importantly, however, the interpretation given to the artifacts provided context that had been systematically erased from the institution.

The legacy of *The Past is Now* is still visible both in the continued discussion among museum professionals about decolonial practices and in the museum itself. Some of the panels from *The Past is Now* have already been integrated into the permanent social history gallery, following the closure of the exhibition (fig. 4). Naturally, however, one temporary exhibition will not single-handedly be able to “decolonize the museum.” The creative process behind the exhibition presented important internal challenges that this article does not have the space to fully unpack, caused by, among other factors, the power dynamics within the team itself, issues of language, and the speed at which the project had to move along.¹⁴ As Sumaya Kassim argues in her essay about the exhibition, the legacy of colonialism and institutionalised discrimination is embedded in the structure of cultural institutions, making it virtually impossible to fully eradicate them.¹⁵

Perhaps, what can be done is continuing to talk about them, embrace dissent in

14 For a more detailed breakdown of the challenges behind *The Past is Now*, I suggest listening to artist and curator Shaheen Kasmani’s presentation “How Do You Decolonise Museums?” for MuseumNext, available online at <https://www.museumnext.com/insight/decolonising-museums/>.

15 Sumaya Kassim, “The museum will not be decolonised,” *Media Diversified*, November 15, 2017, available at: <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonised/>.

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historically white and colonial spaces, and promote honest and fair discussion about uncomfortable topics.

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Ed. note: *This article retains British spellings for words that are part of titles and bespoke phrases, and uses American spellings for all others.*