

THOMAS LAELY, MARC MEYER,  
RAPHAEL SCHWERE (EDS.)

# MUSEUM COOPERATION BETWEEN AFRICA AND EUROPE

A NEW FIELD  
FOR MUSEUM STUDIES



[transcript] → Museum

## From:

*Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer, Raphael Schwere (eds.)*

## **Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe**

### **A New Field for Museum Studies**

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At a time of major transformations in the conditions and self-conceptions of cultural history and ethnological museums worldwide, it has become increasingly important for these museums to engage in cooperative projects.

This book brings together insights and analyses of a wide variety of approaches to museum cooperation from different expert perspectives. Featuring a variety of African and European points of view and providing detailed empirical evidence, it establishes a new field of museological study and provides some suggestions for future museum practice.

**Thomas Laely** holds a PhD in Social Anthropology and specialised in African and Museum Studies. He is the Deputy Head of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, Switzerland.

**Marc Meyer** is a social and cultural anthropologist, currently working as project coordinator and assistant curator at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, Switzerland.

**Raphael Schwere** is a social and cultural anthropologist working on human-animal relations, material culture of disability and museums in the Horn of Africa and East Africa. He is a PhD student and lecturer at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, where he works at the Ethnographic Museum.

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## Preface

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In a rapidly-changing world with its incessant flows of commodities, values and people, the awareness of our overall global complexity and entangledness is growing. So is a consciousness of the role that cultural heritage plays in identity building and self-reassurance about the human condition. Museums and collections seem to be gaining momentum globally in this process. The entwined histories of migrating people and objects are displayed as stories about their multiple trajectories from places of origin into European museum collections. Collaborative academic research is urgently needed to understand, document and shape this process.

Understood against this background – and referring to a concept put forward by the British anthropologist Paul Basu – European museums host ‘object diasporas’. These urge us to listen to each other and discuss their varying contexts of origin, along with wider concerns around former and modern meanings of collections. Basu’s conceptualisation describes collections as historically-grown remittances of the communities of origin in Western museums, from which there is a duty to collaborate on issues of their exploration, on access to collections, on questions of sovereignty in interpretation – as well as the emerging sensitive suggestion, in certain cases, of restitution – or at least digital repatriation.

In December 2016 the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich was honoured to host a pioneering conference on museum cooperation between Africa and Europe. The spirit of its highly-engaged discussions and debates provided a deeply inspiring experience; this volume is one of the conference’s many potential outcomes. I warmly thank all the contributors for their dedication and open-mindedness, as well as the energy they put into finalising their chapters.

This anthology is intended to address not only theories around museum cooperation, but especially to foreground, critically discuss and further develop current topics on the issue, as well as developing further projects and the practice of cooperating. The goal of this young – yet generation-spanning movement – and of this volume, is clear and farsighted: to make some first steps towards long-overdue natural, well-funded and sustainable academic collaborations between European and African museums. I hope this volume will help to pave the way!

*Mareile Flitsch*  
*Director, Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich*  
*Zürich, February 2018*

# Heterodoxy and the Internationalisation and Regionalisation of Museums and Museology

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*A Foreword by Anthony Shelton*

Stewardship over cultural and art works can bring together or split different peoples, communities and nations widely apart. While museums and galleries imbue works with their own meaning, objects can also easily be mobilised by alternative and sometimes contested narratives that challenge their significance regardless of whether fixed by Euro-American or African academics and institutions. The indeterminacy between works and meanings is partly what endows them their capacity to act as catalysts for creative thought, but it also imbues them the power to arouse intense passions over their care, display and interpretation. Little surprise, that this intrinsic and unavoidable field of potential tensions often discloses a museum's own political culture and values and provides telling indications of its conservatism or critical and creative predisposition that can majorly affect its prestige, vitality, relevance and the love or other sentiments its public bestows it. Nelson Abiti's accounts of the National Museum of Uganda's commitment to reconciliation, and the work done by similar institutions including the National Museums of Kenya; Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares (founded by Bonfil Batalla) and El Chopo Museum; Italy's Lampedusa Museum of Migration, and the work of holocaust museums, exemplify museums at their best, which by acknowledging that their fundamental cultural mission exceeds historical and contemporary material culture, become part of a society's essential institutions. In a newly interconnected digital age, and a neo-liberal world with its proliferate and increasing new and shifting borders caused by current geo-political re-alignments, these wall-less museums also question the applicability of the notion of the contact zone twenty years after it was incorporated into museological literature. Contact zones are today everywhere and are increasingly ambiguous, insecure, indiscriminate and, with internationalised militarisation in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, latently deadly.

Collecting long predates European colonization and is not restricted to any one type of civilization. Collections were assembled in fourteenth to seventeenth century Ming China; sixteenth century Aztec Mexico, and in Africa, in the nineteenth century Kalibari trading houses of the Niger Delta described by Nigel Barley (1988); the sixteenth century royal palace of Benin recounted by Joseph Eboreime (2001); the pre-colonial palaces of Bamoun in Fomban and later that which became the Museum of the Bamoun Kings discussed by Germain Loumpet and Michaela Oberhofer, and in pre-colonial Ghana described by Kwame Amoah Labi (all in this volume). Moreover, African mask houses, shrines and groves all contained meaningful object assemblages. While all these examples attest that collecting has long been a global activity, secular museums characterised by their heterogeneous holdings and the systematic typological, material or comparative taxonomies used to order their collections are undoubtedly a uniquely Western invention as are the genres of exhibition they favour. How many exhibitions, for example, have been mounted on Pende masks displayed as art, typological sets, or as part of a larger thematic category, compared to the

dearth of displays on their histories and dynamic innovations including that most intriguing strategy of all described by Strother (1997), of how new forms of Pende masquerades were devised to specifically channel and harness powers against colonial intruders? I know of none, partly because such exhibitions would require deep local historical knowledge, the acknowledgement and valorisation of non-empiricist epistemologies and singular ontologies, and the recognition of the existence of different ocular regimes. However, museums that dare contravene epistemologies, mobilise local histories, and pluralise ways of seeing, as Jesmael Mataga so perceptively argues, become place of unsettlement and destabilisation where everyday categories lose their absolute authority, and meanings are suspended and become relativised as well as interrogated in favour of acclaiming openness to the plurality of human wisdom, ingenuity and intellect – strategies which Jacques Hainard has distinguished as the objective of what he calls a museology of rupture. When everything becomes relativised, museums become the safe places of dialogue and debate, what George Abungu describes as essential to conflict resolution, sensitisation and the propagation of peace, which are needed more than ever in the dangerous world order being politically imposed on us. Only through this epistemological revolution can museums transpose themselves into knowledge repositories, stages for community voices; laboratories and studios in which students can participate in the constant redefinition of culture and identity, and lounges to promote communal dialogue and inclusivity that so many of us rightly think important.

The Ugandan and Gaoan scholars, Paul Wangoola (2000) and Claudio Alvares (2001) have proposed the assemblage of multiversities, a counter knowledge institution to that of the Western university model, which seems to me to be well suited to the world's museums. Wangoola and Alvares argue that the imposition of a universalised empirical, 'scientific' knowledge on communities and societies afflicted by colonialism and still marred by coloniality, has disparaged, marginalised and often eradicated Indigenous knowledge systems that once more effectively described and explained the complex and interdependent relations between a region's natural and cultural habitats than those imposed from outside. The multiversity, they argue, is a project to deconstruct and relativise Western knowledge, while attempting to rescue, revalorise and reapply Indigenous knowledge systems. The multiversity, like museums, therefore protects and disseminates cultural diversity. Once different knowledge systems are equally ranked and valued, they argue, Western knowledge from science to travel writing, need to be deconstructed to reveal their limited epistemological values before being placed, and I would say visualised, exemplified and displayed, next to those from elsewhere. Museums, by employing communities from around the world can reorganise collections to express the multiple ways of perceiving, knowing, interpreting and co-existing on a culturally diverse planet. It is paradoxical that while museology and conservation too often struggle to attain scientific status, and the badge of professionalism it confirms, post-colonial perspectives, and I am particularly thinking here of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Post-Modern Condition* (1984) and Miriam Clavir's convincing critique of the practice of conservation in her *Preserving What is Valued* (2002), demonstrate the conditionality of the metanarratives that collude dominant Western ethical injunctions with scientific method to ascribe them their shaky legitimacy. With their diverse collections and anthropology's own deconstructivist and critical aspirations, ethnographic museums can become places of heterodoxy where diverse interpretations, opinions and theories, and their inevitable metanarratives, intersect, engage, struggle, unravel and become unravelled

to remind us of the world's generous and enormous diversity and its value in instilling diplomatic compass and modulating our thoughts, passions and creativities. If successful, anthropological, ethnographic or world culture museums stand a good chance of becoming models for other types of museums and galleries and of providing a new public framework for the humanities.

If museums do not yet fully embrace the challenges and heterogeneity to which the contributors to this volume aspire, these essays attest to the continuing journeys many such institutions in Africa and Europe began in the past fifty years and how much more open, adventurous, flexible, and even courageous they have become. Recently, Laura Osorio Sunnucks, a curator in my own museum, has made repeated excursions into dangerous areas of Mexico controlled by drug traffickers, dealt with road blockages and confrontations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous protestors and worked with the families of the forty-three disappeared student teachers from Ayotzinapa to curate the exhibition, *Arts of Resistance: Politics and the Past in Latin America* (MOA, 2018). Curators elsewhere, like Boris Wastiau and Beka Economopoulos have also been forced to leave the comfort of their offices and libraries to become activists in order to tell contemporary and relevant stories that provide a platform for contentious issues and for marginalised and isolated peoples. Thanks to international organisations museums have undergone global changes. The idea of community collaboration grew independently in different parts of the world. In Mexico, it was championed by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1983), and in Canada by Michael Ames (1992). Aspects of the history of collaboration in Africa, include the philosophy behind the District Six Museum in South Africa, described by Ciraj Rassool (2006); and in this volume, in Zimbabwe, by Mataga, and in Kenya, by Abungu and Rosalie Hans. Community collaboration, despite the absence of critical evaluation, has become in large parts of the world, a major museum methodology.

Similarly, our understanding of colonialism has become more complex. It is insufficient to be aware only of its different historical and cultural variants, policy divergences, and impacts. We need now to focus on its continual legacy as theorised, for example, through Walter Mignolo's concept of coloniality (2007), and Pablo Gonzalez Cassanova's formulation of the conditions and effects of internal colonisation (1965), which rescale former external asymmetric power relations responsible for dislocating the distribution, uses and benefits of resources away from local communities, to a focus on internal exploitative mechanisms manipulated by the state. In the cultural arena, this unequal mosaic of internal power relations is expressed in countries like Mexico, Indonesia and Canada, by local and regional museums pursuing repatriations from their own national museums as well as foreign ones. Magnolo's and Gonzalez's theoretical frameworks provide alternative ways of interpreting postcolonial relations depending on whether they are seen as determined by ethnicity or by an internationalised, hierarchical class-based system. Nevertheless, museums need to be understood, along with the exhibitionary complexes they institutionalise, as inclusive aspects of what Regina Bendix (2012) defines as 'heritage regimes'. These include the local and national policy contexts underlying the conceptualisation of heritage which inevitably affect the entirety of a museum's complex, inflected, and multifaceted relationships. Only at this detailed level of relational analysis can this crucial debate between ethnic and class based determinants of internal and neo-colonial relationships be freed from the polemical assertions that bedevil it.

The fields of museums and museology, through the processes of regionalisation and internationalisation have, as the editors of this volume acknowledge, changed enormously. Demands for greater inclusivity and democratisation; the assertion of Indigenous rights; the change from monocultural to multicultural and intercultural citizenries, and the scholarly critical scrutiny focused on museums during the final three decades of the last century, have transformed many beyond recognition. We still need to deepen that critique to the political histories of their wider heritage regimes, but the time has arrived to begin the work of systematically reconfiguring museums. Change will take different shapes depending on the country and/or region where museums are located, but some general principles are emerging. Internally, outside of Europe, many nation states are culturally disarticulated and governments need to enact better integrated cultural policies. In Canada for example, the majority of citizens outside the southern flange of large conurbations located within a hundred miles of the US border, have limited cultural provisions and few and grossly underfunded museums able to accommodate major exhibitions. National museum legislation is required, as it is elsewhere, to create meaningful cooperation and share resources between national, provincial, local and community museums and Indigenous cultural centres. This network is essential to promote the movement of objects, exhibitions and community based expertise to improve access, inform cultural diversity, educate and realign knowledge and creativity, and disseminate shared values of respect, tolerance and understanding that benefit and ground national or geo-political regional citizenry. Effective international networks need to be developed and stabilised for the same reasons, but they also need to encourage cross-cultural curatorial practices and, because of the increased transparency of museums through social media and the internet, they ought to improve awareness of threats that exhibitions might periodically attract from intolerant internal factions and foreign regimes and their potential effects on curators and sponsors. Culture wars although up to now largely polemical, are becoming increasingly fierce and may, under US, Russian or Turkish irresponsible political leadership, become hot. None of these things can be accomplished without deep, meaningful and effective international cooperation. Museums in the digital age are borderless, and therefore, mutually more accountable.

While there are many positive examples of collaborations between European and American museums, and those from Africa, Labi, Oberhofer and Abungu are correct to appeal for greater mutual respect, equality and unanimity in devising and managing shared projects and clarifying mutual assumptions. In Canada, Indigenous communities have emphasised the importance of drafting specific memorandums of understanding with museums, because through conversing, devising, setting parameters, understanding logistics, and confirming ethical protocols and expectations, respect, fairness and understanding become mutually rooted. Soon after I took up my current position at The University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, an institution that has widely employed collaborative methodologies from at least the 1980s, I asked three curators what for them constituted collaboration. The first answered that it involved the role of curator being transformed into that of facilitator to enable the community to independently take responsibility to determine an exhibition's subject, text, object selection and design; a second curator, opined it involved periodic dialogues with the community to ensure the fidelity of the exhibition with their expectations, and the third, described collaboration as a dialogical process through which culture was generated by the conversations between curators and community repre-

sentatives. The first approach corresponds to what Michael Ames called participant action research; the second approach, museologists might equate with a consultative model, and the third might best be defined by what Johannes Fabian would describe as a dialogical approach, but what is important is that each method generates a different genre of exhibition which in large part is conditioned by the community itself. The question I would now ask, thirteen years later is, can we add to these, a fourth category of cooperative ethically motivated curatorial practice represented by Sunnucks, Wastiau and Economopoulos, of the type that has already motivated the works of certain groups of artists? Despite these essential analytical discussions which are so desperately needed, outside of the obfuscations of new intellectual and geo-political realities, and the complexities of an often disarticulated museological landscape, we are fortunate to have at least one imperative and largely shared anchor that can help us navigate these complex issues and, I think assist in their resolution. That is that access to culture is an inalienable right, and museums whose governments are signatories to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, are encumbered to seriously apply especially articles eleven, twelve and thirty-one, to their future practices. Article eleven unequivocally states: 'Indigenous people have the right to practice and revitalise their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestation of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.' This, at the very least requires either cultural diversification and changes in the power relations within museums or an object's restitution to another place where these conditions prevail. Instead of fearing difficult conversations, we might accept instead that this is perhaps a good place from where to agree fundamental philosophies that can help reconfigure the future relationships between our varied and diverse institutions and provide encouragement to compose together a shared vision and purpose, which must inevitably be internationalist. New ways of configuring museums and their collections inevitably lead also to cultural reconciliation.

*Anthony Alan Shelton*

*Visiting Research Fellow, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka*

*Director, University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology*

*Professor, Art History, Visual Art and Theory, University of British Columbia, Vancouver*

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