

# GLOBALISATION, POST-COLONIALISM AND MUSEUMS

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An extraordinary exchange took place during the ICOFOM meeting at the ICOM conference in Vienna in August 2007. An impassioned plea from a Benin delegate for the Benin Bronzes (C16-C19) to be returned to West Africa was met by a vigorous refusal from French delegates who argued many things including that the bronzes were too fragile to travel and, finally, in an exasperated tone: “the French people wish to see them too”. They suggested that, in Africa, photographs could be substitutes for the famous sculptures which were taken by the British in a punitive expedition in 1897 from Benin City amid huge general destruction. They have been exhibited in the British Museum and other museums throughout Europe. The French delegates’ argument took no account of the role of important objects in forming national identity, fostering local pride and attracting a tourist industry, nor the long debate on the morality of the removal of objects of cultural heritage significance from their original locations.<sup>1</sup>

That such an encounter should take place at the University of Vienna in a room filled with people from countries including Canada, Australia, Germany, Brazil, Argentina and the USA was a sign of the global aspect of the contemporary museum world. The international exchanges, in which the museological problems of one country were found to be very similar in another, proclaimed the global preoccupations of museums. The refusal of the French delegates to listen to the arguments of the African, however, was the most remarkable aspect of all. It was remarkable not because it was politically rash, indeed untenable, to insist on the ownership rights of a western former colonising power, but because it was 2007 and most of the museologists present that day thought that debate on these issues had already become very sophisticated during the previous thirty years as museums began to relinquish authority and open to debates on post-colonial responsibility (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Karp, Kreamer & Lavine, 1992; Pearse, 1995; Vergo, 1989). This is notwithstanding the sentiments and unacknowledged politics of the 2001 “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums: ‘Museums Serve Every Nation’” (Karp *et al.*, 2006, 247). This document restated the museum power *status quo*, asserted the rights of major museums to retain their huge collections acquired from other cultures and attempted to ignore the politics and history of collection.

In the light of that moment in Vienna, this paper reflects on globalisation in the post-colonial museum space. It argues that, for museums, globalisation emerges from a long history of engagement with the diversity of world cultures and does not represent a radically new era. Despite globalisation’s homogenising force it does not threaten the museum’s pre-eminent role in caring for original objects nor suggest that the museum’s existence is under threat. This paper works from the position that elements of globalisation have been perceivable in museums since colonisation and museum collection began, indeed that museums were among the leading institutions which forged those global connections (Sheets-Pyenson, 1988). The contemporary understanding of globalisation as instantaneous communication and massive worldwide interconnectedness must be understood as an intensification of the former, colonising, reality of museums. This paper looks at the way that museums can be understood in terms of globalisation as places where the power of western cultural imperialism is

maintained and where it is simultaneously resisted. The discussion is illustrated by looking at the example of the contested Benin Bronzes and their exhibition in Paris at the Musée du Quai Branly.

## **Globalisation and museums**

The great interconnectedness of the world which is enabled by communication technologies is popularly and disapprovingly understood as a force for homogenisation – the “Americanisation”, ‘Disneyfication’ and ‘McDonaldisation’ of the planet” (Sofield, 2001: 105) producing a sameness that is found in so many parts of the world. Homogenisation is understood to be a negative force because it demolishes cultural diversity. An opposite effect of globalisation, however, is perceived in a movement towards maintaining diversity, expressed as “localisation”, fragmentation of culture (Allen & Sakamoto, 2006: 2; Featherstone, 1995; Sofield, 2001) and the acceleration of hybridisation (Milward, 2003: 80; Trouillot, 2002: 9), leading in some cases to the collapse of political systems, for example, Yugoslavia. It leads to cultural clashes that are focussed on asserting identity against the force of homogenisation. International travel shows us readily that although we can buy a McDonald’s hamburger in so many cities of the world, to buy one in Paris is very different from buying one in Taipei where our fellow diners are different and the world outside the restaurant is very different. In fact, those moments of engaging with such global products are also the moments of perceiving difference.

In Vienna, during that Benin-French exchange, we were faced with some important questions. Were we witnessing a debate which could be styled as a “relic” from a bundle of issues concerned with the rebalancing of rights after the withdrawal of many colonising powers from their colonies? In other words, could we ignore this exchange as an embarrassing vestige of former debates? Or, was it possible that the clash we were witnessing was symptomatic of both on-going post-colonial preoccupations and, at the same time, the abrasive clash described by Karp *et al.* (2006) as a museum expression of globalisation? Were globalisation issues in the museum institution emerging from on-going post-colonial encounters?

Debates on the moral role of the museum in the post-colonial era have resulted in the rewriting of many museum vision and mission statements in order to reposition museums as places of cultural encounter and cultural protection, rather than as perpetrators in the cultural despoilation of conquered indigenous peoples. Before globalisation was grappled with by museums there were some decades during which the New Museology and responses to post-colonial challenges were implemented in many parts of the world. Many museums now insist on a rhetoric of reconciliation that repositions museums as sites of dialogue where exciting cultural discoveries are daringly imagined (Vergo, 1989; Karp & Lavine, 1991).

Rethinking the mission of the museum has been aimed especially at finding new approaches to the representation of marginalised people. Hence, women are more extensively represented, everyday life is celebrated and people who have been colonised are consulted about their artefacts. In some cases, contested objects and skeletal remains have been returned to indigenous people and, in some museums, the presence on the staff of indigenous and colonised peoples is mandatory. In addition, and crucially for the French example, many non-western objects have been re-valued,

their knowledge value expanded from a purely ethnographic interest to encompass a new “art” status. In some cases, they have been re-designated as art works only. (This problem is discussed further below.) Although there are thousands of examples of artefacts still being held by western museums that were acquired in dubious circumstances during the colonial era, the debates have been fully aired. Many museums by late 2007 had made substantial gestures towards rectifying historic wrongs. In Vienna, that day, we were forced to rethink the role of the museum in an era of post-colonial response and globalisation.

In the volume of museum essays, *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, Karp *et al.* (2006) argue that the world of museums has changed substantially since its companion volumes (Karp & Lavine, 1991; Karp, Kreamer & Lavine, 1992) appeared and that “international and global connections have become central today to the circumstances of museums and other display institutions (Szwaja & Ybarra-Frausto, 2006: xii).

“The range of museum roles, definitions, and cross-institutional relations entails conjunctions of disparate constituencies, interests, goals and perspectives. These conjunctions produce debates, tensions, collaborations, contests, and conflicts of many sorts, at many levels – museum frictions that have both positive and negative outcomes... these frictions play out as museum-generated social processes and globalizing processes intersect and interact.” (Kratz & Karp, 2006: 2)

Fulfilling a dream to repair the damage of the colonising years has become a constant theme of museums as they grapple with their past complicity in the colonising process. As museums have moved to cultural inclusiveness and the removal of hierarchies, the unwritten assumption has been that acrimony would be reduced; in many cases this appears to have been the case. An outstanding example is the Museum of Anthropology in British Columbia which has created itself as a centre of dialogue between various Canadian indigenous peoples. The twin forces of globalisation, however, homogenisation and local fragmentation, have continued in many other cases to aggravate the very cultural wounds that rethinking the museum was intended to soothe. The globalising force to homogenise is described by Birkett (2006) as necessarily and continuously resisted. Globalisation “lives - like any system - on its resistances, with an inherent potential to create new and diverse identities, forms and values” (Birkett, 2006: 47). She is optimistic: “resistance involves reimagining the culture of everyday life in forms that will bring the global and the local into new configurations” (Birkett, 2006: 62). Resistance, therefore, is central to globalisation. It is a sign of the inherent globalisation clashes enabled by the spectacular communication of modern technology and it leads to friction between different cultural groups.

In France, the relocation of ethnographic objects to the Pavillon des Sessions inside the palace of The Louvre in April 2000, was a forerunner for the new museum, Musée du Quai Branly which was to be dedicated to non-European art. It seemed to be a moment in which the desire to repair historic colonial wrongs reached an important landmark. Significantly, it had reached an aesthetic landmark; non-European art was declared to be artistically equal. The French President of the time, Jacques Chirac, enthusiastically supported the entry of non-European arts into The Louvre, saying “there is no more of a hierarchy of arts than there is among peoples’ and calling it ‘deeply shocking and regrettable’ that three-quarters of the world’s humanity was unrepresented in the Louvre” (Price, 2007: 36-37).

This quote reveals Chirac's desire for a museological expression of the equality of peoples and art works, but he fails, most ironically, to see that he perpetuates the centuries old hierarchies by privileging The Louvre as the most important destination for the great works of non-French people. Ultimately, therefore, in this particular museological logic, it is the French, through The Louvre museum curatorial system, who decide what is great art. Admission of artefacts to The Louvre functions, therefore, as a form of *imprimatur*. On one hand, therefore, statements such as Chirac's appear to abolish the art hierarchies imposed by Europe but, on the other hand, they are simultaneously imposed as strongly as they ever were because it is still Europe, in this case France, which is deciding what will or will not be considered great enough for entry into the European museum system.

The movement of non-European art into The Louvre was a moment that was both an act of post-colonial reconciliation and also of globalisation as western imperialism asserted its rights to choose the great works of non-European peoples who could be permitted into the European art system. The western imperial choice was an example of the persistence of the powerful and old homogenising European vision of art. Simultaneously, however, as the homogenising vision of Europe was being reinforced, it was also being strongly resisted as many commentators criticised the decision to display the works first and foremost as aesthetic objects and to demote their ethnographic contexts. Chirac's decrying of the previous absence of non-European art in The Louvre had indeed signalled the dominance of the aesthetic terms under which these art works would move into the Pavillon des Sessions. Ethnographic information was made available in nearby rooms, but was secondary to their aesthetic status decreed by The Louvre. The works, therefore, were presented with little foregrounding of their historic, social and cultural contexts which were the very aspects of exhibition which were being fought for around the world in the post-colonial museological environment.

The opening in 2006 of the Musée du Quai Branly reinforced The Louvre's 2001 insistence on the exhibition of non-European works in terms of their aesthetic qualities. Artefacts, therefore, are sometimes displayed at odds with their original meanings or even artistic intentions (Price, 2007: 147). Price cites, for example, a cape which was worn by its original owners with stripes running horizontally and which in the Musée du Quai Branly was exhibited with the stripes running vertically because the museum display case was intended for an object that was more vertical than horizontal. The new museum virtually refused to discuss the often dubious and frequently violent backgrounds to France's acquisition of non-European works. As Price (2007: 172) says, this topic was "handled most selectively" with limited ethnographic material available (Price, 2007: 163). In clinging to old forms of museum authority and limiting contextual political and historical material, the new museum has functioned as an outstanding case for highlighting the clash of cultures that is inherent in globalisation.

### **Dialogue and clash**

When the Musée du Quai Branly opened it emphasised that the museum was a place of dialogue. It could be seen, therefore, as enabling a core aspect of globalisation, intense communication. Examination of reactions to the huge exhibition of the Benin Bronzes reveals that it is one thing to state the value of dialogue and quite another for those outside the museum to agree that you have achieved it. The negative reaction to the

exhibition indicates that the use of the word , “dialogue”, as a principle to which the museum aspires, could be understood somewhat ironically in the context of globalisation. Where does dialogue connect with globalisation? What is the essence of globalisation? It is intense interconnectedness producing unprecedented communication through new technologies. The communication tends to both homogenise and fragment; to lead to an imperial cultural centre and break, at the same time, into discrete and also hybrid cultural differences. It is crucial to note that communication in the form of dialogue, that is speaking, listening and answering each other is a major principle that underlines post-colonial attempts at re-thinking the philosophy of museums.

The intention to enable dialogue was undercut in the exhibition of the Benin masterpieces by imposing a western aesthetic framework on the display. The bronzes were displayed in bare, white painted surrounds, a most familiar style of western exhibition which is designed to strip away material implicitly declared extraneous and distracting. The intended result is that the viewer is able to focus on the pure aesthetic qualities of the work. This is a problematic aesthetic, even for western art, as the provision of contexts clearly assists in wider interpretation of the works. To exhibit art works as if they sprang fully formed from a neutral space is to deny almost every aspect of the works except their form. Form, however, also has a history, and knowing that background also enriches the viewing experience.

Insisting on western aesthetics when exhibiting non-western artefacts reveals the homogenising force of globalisation in museums. This style of aesthetics can be difficult for viewers to identify as the stripped back display space appears to be devoid of cultural markers. Until quite recently it was easy for museums to perpetuate this common aesthetics of display because the cultural markers of the producing, western, culture were disguised beneath the apparent neutrality of white space. The exhibition of the Benin Bronzes was somewhat at odds with the aesthetic of the main part of the Musée du Quai Branly with its serpentine “river” path for visitors moving through the exhibits which are displayed mostly in a conservatorially protective semi-darkness. The display of the bronzes in their white surrounds has been, however, replicated, in countless examples in western museums. In many cases artefacts which were functional have had their functionality stripped from them by the museum process as they are exhibited as art objects. The absence of context is the effect of the white space; it nullifies the significance of the histories of the objects.

The era of globalisation is not a new moment for museums. What we can say, however, is that this is a time for museums of the intensification of the post-colonial experience and the intensification of communication and dialogue. In the light of the example of the Benin Bronzes in Paris, the word “dialogue” seems unintentionally ironic. Dialogue about the bronzes has not been confined to their aesthetic values nor seems to have taken place within the museum space. The intention of good will in the post-colonial museum is now confronted with the totalising communication possibilities of globalisation and, therefore, an intensification of critique from outside the museum profession. This is the dialogue that globalisation, with its amazing communication technologies, has made possible. In 2007 and into January 2008, as buses moved around Paris plastered with posters advertising the exhibition *Benin: Five Centuries of Royal Art*, criticism of the event grew. Given the era of globalisation, the web was, of course, one of the primary places for protest. Below are some examples of the resistance that is as much a part of globalisation as homogeneity.

“These precious items are stolen goods. It cannot even be argued that they are the spoils of war – no war was declared by the British before they carried away these treasures. While many will marvel at the splendour of this exhibition in Paris, it is sobering to consider just how many of the visitors to the Musée du Quai Branly will give the rightful ownership of these priceless exhibits a second thought.” (Williams, 2007)

“...the aesthetic view point prevailed over ethnological presentation and historical depth...most of the materials and objects relating to life at the Benin Royal court, the national attires of the Edo, their dances and festivals were no longer visible. The videos and pictures which explained the process and creation of the bronze objects and the artists at work were left out.” (Opoku, 2007)

The curatorial decision made by the Musée du Quai Branly to decontextualise and depoliticise the sculptures has, in effect, been no different from the long history of the exhibition of the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum where the beauty of the works is highlighted, but the on-going requests from Greece for their return all but ignored. Ironically, it is the French who refer to this long running museum scandal in their word for the removal of cultural heritage from its source, “elginisme”, but who seem not to perceive themselves having done the same thing by continuing to restrict the flow of information in the museum and thereby ignoring the politics of the objects and their often violent acquisition.

### **Museum responses to globalisation**

Many museums have rushed to respond to globalisation by installing banks of computers, establishing web sites and creating virtual exhibitions. Many analyses of globalisation in museums are confined to comment on these technical areas which seem to threaten the centrality of the importance of the “real” object in collection and exhibition in museums. The role of the museum visitor in this highly technical world is celebrated because the visitor has an enormous information choice. If museums do not, however, also examine the impact of globalisation’s tensions then the museum institution is going to be very slow in responding in a sophisticated manner. It needs to deal with the cultural manner of representation rather than focussing almost exclusively on the impact of technical elements.

Forces of globalisation expose the vulnerability of many museums as they are uncertain how to respond to this new round of debates about exhibition and communication. For many it must seem that the apparent demolition of hierarchies of cultures was a sufficient moral and political response to post-colonial challenges. The Musée du Quai Branly continues to sell the catalogue of the highly aestheticised Benin Bronzes without comment, long after the criticisms began. It seems like a form of institutional paralysis not to respond to the radical democracy of global communication that continues to open the museum world to scrutiny.

Gurian (2007) argues that a practical response by museums to globalisation ought to be relinquishment of authority and the assumption of the role of “knowledge brokers”. I add to this that museums need to grasp the tensions that are magnified by globalisation’s connection to post-colonialism. The tensions should be investigated because it is only in these expressions of dissatisfaction and indeed, anger, that museums can begin to identify moral approaches for their growing disparate audiences. Museums are not

going to find answers by looking to the ranks of their culturally homogenous staff. The institutions need to speak to those who made the artefacts or to their descendants. By doing so the moments of tension and clash made so loud by globalisation can be made museologically productive as the museum confronts them.

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## **Abstract: Globalisation, Post-Colonialism and Museums**

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Globalisation in museums emerges from a long history of their engagement with diverse cultures. Contemporary debates about globalisation need to be understood as emerging from post-colonial issues about allowing the lives and voices of others to be represented in the museum space. The central element of globalisation is intense interconnectedness made possible by worldwide communication technology. It should be understood in museums, therefore, not as something radically new, but as offering an intensification of the processes of dialogue that were begun some decades ago as museums responded to post-colonial challenges. This paper examines the twin globalising forces of homogenisation and local resistance to it by looking at the example of the famous Benin Bronzes from West Africa and their recent exhibition in Paris at the Musée du Quai Branly. The bronzes were exhibited in an aesthetic framework rather than in political and historical contexts and provoked much criticism. If museums wish to respond to globalisation they need to respond to such criticisms and see them as a positive and potentially productive opportunity.

## **Résumé : La Mondialisation, Le Post-Colonialisme et Les Musées**

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La mondialisation apparaît dans les musées d'une longue histoire de leur participation aux travaux de diverses cultures. Débats contemporains sur la mondialisation doivent être compris comme sortant d'une post-coloniale sur les questions permettant la vie et la voix des autres à se faire représenter dans l'espace muséal. L'élément central de la mondialisation est intense interconnexion rendue possible par la technologie de communication mondiale. Il devrait être compris dans les musées, donc, non pas comme quelque chose de radicalement nouveau, mais comme offrant une intensification des processus de dialogue qui ont commencé il ya quelques décennies que les musées a répondu post-coloniale défis. Le présent document examine les deux forces de la mondialisation et l'homogénéisation de la résistance locale en regardant l'exemple célèbre des Bronzes du Bénin de l'Afrique de l'Ouest et leur récente exposition à Paris au Musée du Quai Branly. Les bronzes ont été exposés dans un cadre esthétique plutôt que dans les politiques et historiques et a provoqué de nombreuses critiques. Si les musées voudraient répondre à la mondialisation dont ils ont besoin pour répondre à ces critiques et de les considérer comme un positif et potentiellement productives occasion.

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<sup>1</sup> The claims to ownership of the Benin Bronzes are complicated by the fact that the modern nation of Benin, formerly Dahomy, is not the place where they were made; they were made in what is now part of Nigeria.