# To be or not to be colonial: Museums facing their exhibitions

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*Abstract.* This article first gives an insight at what the idea of museum meant before the modern era, to set the global, historical and political context in which modern museums emerged. It then analyzes the conditions that paved the way for institutional change as the weakening of the national setting has allowed other layers of histories -local, regional, community, indigenous, minority- to be expressed. Finally, it explains why handling colonial heritage in contemporary exhibitions -through the historical contextualization of the collections on display- is of paramount importance to museums small and big, and look at the extent to which they succeed in adapting to change, through various examples taken from Europe and Australia.

> *Keywords:* 1. museology, 2. colonial heritage,
> 3. collected objects, 4. racial discourse.

*Resumen.* El artículo ofrece en principio un acercamiento a lo que significaba la idea de museo antes de la era moderna, para establecer el contexto mundial, histórico y político en el cual surgió el museo moderno. Posteriormente analiza las circunstancias que pavimentaron el camino para un cambio institucional al tiempo que el debilitamiento del marco nacional permitía la expresión de otras clases de historias –local, regional, de la comunidad, indígena, de minorías–. Finalmente, explica por qué el manejo de la herencia colonial en las exhibiciones contemporáneas, a través de la contextualización histórica de las colecciones en exposición, es de vital importancia para los museos grandes y pequeños, y revisa qué tanto han sido exitosas estas instituciones en adaptarse al cambio, a través de diversos ejemplos de Europa y Australia.

> *Palabras clave:* 1. museología, 2. herencia colonial,
> 3. objetos de colecciones, 4. discurso racial.

*Introduction: Museums beyond the history / memory divide*

MEMORY, HISTORY AND MUSEUMS ARE TRADITIONALLY LINKED on the basis of the assumption that they deal with the same task; namely, "preserving the past". In the fields of history, museum studies and cultural studies, it is now widely recognized that the last quarter of the XXth century was marked by a profound change in the relationship Western countries traditionally enjoyed with the past. In practice, it has meant that national histories -that is, official histories- began to be superseded by individual and group histories based primarily on their experiences and the memory they kept of such experiences. At museum level, the interest and preferral for regional and local histories emerged in opposition to the national, grand narrative (Mcintyre, 2001; Taffin, 2000). The latter was based on the discourse of technical progress and racial superiority of the Western world, which had reached its limits with the experience of Nazism.

The growing interest in genealogical research and cultural heritage, the opening of archives for public consultation, the development of commemorative events, and the recovery of previously silenced areas of history all testify to the upsurge of unofficial history that came to be defined as a 'memory wave' *(vague mémorielle)* by French historian Pierre Nora, the "founding father" of memory studies. The aim of memory studies is to analyze the ties between the past (whether real or imaginary), individual and collective consciousness of identity, and a sense of belonging. According to Nora, 'memory' has gained importance following two phenomena. The first was the 'acceleration of history' of the last quarter of the XXth century, whereby events rapidly sank into oblivion, hence the human reaction of 'stockpiling' and the proliferation of museums, archives, libraries, and so forth. The second was the "democratization of history", that is the emergence, over a very short period of time, of the histories of minority groups (such as emancipated peoples of previous colonies).

Pierre Nora's work has been in many ways fundamental in establishing a renewed perception of history and its uses, whether

popular or institutional. Yet, each of the author's attempts to define the differences between memory and history shows that these are inescapably intertwined, and in so doing, Nora seems to lack a comprehensive view of what has been at stake since the 1970s. Basically, the work of Pierre Nora has proved that history does not need to be national to be called history. The fact that it was necessary for historians such as Pierre Nora to use another term (memory) in the struggle to define what belonged to 'history' and what belonged to 'memory' only enlightens how history developed as the discipline of the Nation-state, which objective was voluntarily reduced to the registration of national events, heroes and values. In my opinion, Nora's contribution to cultural history (or memory studies) is limited, as he takes for granted the boundaries of the discipline of history. He fails to ask why history was first and foremost national, so as to look at the implications the answer to such a question would foster. To look at the national setting of history forces us to examine the type of values that were prevalent at a particular time, in this case, when the Nation as a political structure was created and developed, at the end of the XVIIIth century, and throughout the XIXth century. As such, it was shaped by another event that in many ways produced the evolution of European powers into nations; that of colonial expansion (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1997).

That a second wave of Western hegemony over the rest of the world occurred after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and its subsequent ethical implications), alongside the fact that the economic profits provided by colonial expansion did not directly benefit the majority of the European population, indicates that these expanding states needed to find strong justification to ensure popular support for colonial activities. European colonialism was not reduced to economic profits; its justifying discourse also forged European identity and culture as "The modern West" (Hall, 2000; Hall, 1997). The use of the museum as a social tool to promote such cultural identity and values embodies this cultural project.

Consequently, the end of colonial order after the Second World War has not caused a mere change in the geopolitical scene; it has had a deep impact on how the West defines itself, how successful Western nations adapt to this societal change, and again, how the museum is able to find a new social purpose outside the colonial frame. Only when we consider colonialism as a full system in which modern, national identities and values were forged are we able to understand that the "acceleration" and the "democratization" of history both emerged from the same event, that is, the end of the national, colonial order as the dominant cultural model.

In light of such information, what does all of this mean for our understanding of the history of museums and museum discourses?

The word museum comes from the word 'muse', and was, in the ancient world, the place where muses were to be praised. The museum as a space with delimited functions existed largely before it was utilized by the European states as a social and scientific tool for colonial purposes. In this presentation, I would like to examine the use of the museum in the West prior to colonialism to subsequently demonstrate how the advent of the modern, public museum arrived as a rupture caused by the colonial, national ideology. In turn, such analysis will help us to understand the functions and the discourses museums have tended to adopt in the last 20 years or so, and hence explain the fundamental transformation that museums are experiencing today.

*I. The Art of Memory and the Art of Collecting: from talking images to talking objects*

Having commented that I disagreed with Pierre Nora's uses of history and memory, I can now assert that he was absolutely right in utilizing memory as a key word to understand the processes of collective perception of the past. Such is true especially in dealing with museums: memory, after all, comes from the Greek goddess Mnemosyne who was the mother of all Muses; it is worth

taking a look at why and how the Ancients believed memory to be the basis for creativity.

Two major reflections on memory were left by the Greek philosophers. Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia: on Memory and Recollection* has prevailed until modern day, according to which, "All memory is of the past" (Ricoeur, 2001:7). The second reflection is that of Plato, in which reference to the past remains more implicit, and emphasis is placed on the present rather than the past. Under Plato's scheme, memory is "the present representation of an absent thing" *(idem).* In other words, while the Platonic perspective encloses the question of memory within that of imagination, the Aristotelian outlook argues for the inclusion of the issue of the image within that of remembering. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in his work *History, Memory, Forgetting* discarded the Platonic version of memory because it was related to "the fantastic, the fictional, the unreal, the possible, the utopian", but for our museum matters, the notion of "present representation" of that past is of greater relevance.

Here, rather than define memory as 'everything that was left out of national history', I refer to memory as it was used in Europe for centuries, that is, as one of the five parts of rhetoric *(inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio)*. If rhetoric is today remembered as an art of persuasion, in the Ancient world it went far beyond such objectives, and was rather used as an intellectual means of production. The art of memory was a technique thanks to which the orator could deliver long speeches. Before the advent of printing which rendered note-taking possible, a trained memory was of vital importance. As a result, the following training technique, or mnemonic, traveled down through the European tradition until relatively modern times (Yates, 2007:2-4).

While different mnemonic systems existed, all were based on imprinting the memory through the utilization of a series of places *(loci),* the most common being the various rooms of a building. Orators would prepare their speech by placing key words and ideas in the different rooms that constituted the imagined building, not

omitting the ornaments that decorated them. Here we can see how memory and imagination worked as one, enabling the orator to make his speech correctly, that is, allowing him to remember the points to be developed in the right order, since the speech followed the architectural structure of the building. The memory process was then thought to be most like the act of seeing: perceptions were represented as images, and these representations, located within memory, made memory inherently locational (Carruthers, 2008:20).

The works of historians on the art of memory are enlightening in regards to the way in which world knowledge was perceived and handled, a perception that would also command the agency of ancient museums. Indeed, it is possible to say that memory and museum work as one same space in which a special meaning is given to a visual medium. The museum would be a "3D version" of the relation between image/object and meaning/discourse, articulated along the same classification/production line.

The reason why it is possible to align the collecting process with rhetorical functions is because it is dependent on discursive practices. As brilliantly analyzed by Walter Benjamin, collecting has much to do with the organization of the world in a coherent whole: collectors perceive their environment as a chaos that needs to be controlled so that it makes sense. This object/meaning relation was the primary function of the Renaissance *museaum,* as demonstrated by Paula Findlen through the tracing of the genealogy of the word *museaum.* Strictly speaking, *museaum* in Renaissance Europe referred to the place consecrated to the Muses in the Ancient world, and to the famous library of Alexandria. From the very beginning, it was linked to the idea of study, reflection, and the attempt to preserve knowledge through the act of gathering and organizing into a particular order.

With the Conquest of the Americas and the rediscovering of Antiquity, the European aristocracy developed a taste for the art of collecting objects that would glorify their military career and give them social prestige. Collected objects were "curiosities" because they came from geographically distant territories, as

well as historically distant times. These *studioli,* wonder cham-
bers, or cabinets of curiosities mixed hundreds, or thousands of
objects, that came to be classified in three sections: *naturalia*
(with animal, vegetal and mineral elements), *artificialia* (crea-
tions of Western man, such as paintings, weapons, astrolabes
and telescopes) and *exoticas* (anything that came from faraway
lands, either natural or manufactured, and that was perceived as
uncanny or bizarre by the European eye).

The *museaum,* then, was at once a social and an intellectual pla-
ce; as much as a public and a private place that satisfied personal
curiosity and social prestige. It encompassed the *bibliotheca,* the
*cabinet,* the *galleria,* the *cornucopia* and the *theatro,* all of which
described significant aspects of the intellectual and cultural life
which were central to early modern Europe (Findlen, 1989:59). It
underlined how these clearly distinct categories (the theatre, the
library and the gallery) were not so neatly separated; they rather
constituted different applications of one same activity, namely
'to think'. Interestingly, the indo-European origin of memory is
believed to be men-, meaning 'to think'. Collecting was more
about the confrontation of ideas, and objects served as a basis
for most intellectual activities: they provided the text on which
to produce a new discourse, as in rhetoric, one would gather
images for a speech. As collecting implied ordering, comparative
and taxonomic functions were developed; the *museaum* was the
"locating principle, circumscribing the space in which learned
activities could occur" (Findlen, 1989:61).

Clearly, the art of memory and the art of collecting for the Re-
naissance *museaum* proceed from the same human process. Mary
Carruthers' argument in *The Craft of Thought* can be applied to
explain Renaissance collecting:

> The Latin word "inventio" gave rise to two separate words in mod-
> ern English. One is our word "invention", meaning the "creation of
> something new" (or at least different). These creations can be either
> ideas or material objects, including of course works of art, music and
> literature. (...) The other modern English word derived from Latin

invention is "inventory". This word refers to the storage of many diverse materials, but not to random storage (...) Inventoried materials are counted and placed in locations within an overall structure which allows any item to be retrieved easily and at once...

Having "inventory" is a requirement for "invention". Not only does this statement assume that one cannot create ("invent") without a memory store ("inventory"), to invent from and with, but is also assumes that one's memory-store is effectively "inventoried", that its matters are in readily-recovered "locations". Some type of locational structure is a prerequisite for any inventive thinking at all (Carruthers, 2000:11-12).

Renaissance museums were based on such 'compositional art' to give meaning to objects. A meaning had nothing to do with the primary functions of the objects collected. Science, nature, aesthetics and mysticism were all intertwined in a logic that depended only on that of the collector. As suggested by Walter Benjamin, the relationship to objects is one

which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them (Benjamin, 1982:61).

Cabinets of curiosities, or wonder chambers, as they were commonly called, took the shape of their owner's imagination and creative abilities in ordering a discourse, as the orator would arrange his images to structure his speech.

Because of the later use of their taxonomic ordering by public museums of the 19th century, these cabinets of curiosities have been retained as the ancestors of our modern museums. However, there was a significant shift in the social use of public museums and the discourse it conveyed, so much so that it was difficult to sustain continuity as a cultural practice. Rather, it emphasizes how the 19th century museum is a rupture in the history of museums.

## II. Colonialism and the social purpose
## of the modern museum

The social purpose of the public, modern museum has been tho-
roughly analyzed by museum historian Tony Bennett, who in turn
has heavily relied on Michel Foucault's analysis of the modern
State. Foucault argues that we are able to trace the development of
modern forms of government through the emergence of new tech-
nologies which are aimed at controlling the conduct of individuals
and populations (such as the prison or the asylum). Following the
same line, Bennett remarks that the 19th century was marked by
the development of various new spaces that are familiar to us today,
such as the fair, the international exhibition, the department store,
public parks, and public libraries. Together with the museum, these
different spaces were developed and used by the State with the
special purpose of reestablishing the relations of power between the
State and the people, through the use of cultural and leisure activities.

From the mid nineteenth century forward, cultural institutions
were conceptualized and organized in a distinctively modern
way, that is, with the purpose of civilizing the population as a
whole according bourgeois values. Such reformation took place
through the acquisition of knowledge through instruction, and
the shaping of conduct and behavior. Museums were thought of
as "passionless reformers" at the service of the government that
worked to civilize the morals and manners of the population,
avoid riots (which were common at the time), and to provide a
safe alternative from pubs and bars. In England for example, the
Report of the 1834 Select Committee on Drunkenness suggested
the establishment of "walks, paths, playgrounds, halls, theatres,
libraries, museums and art galleries so as to draw off by innocent
pleasurable recreation and instruction, all who can be weaned
from habits of drinking" (Bennett, 1995:20).

Nineteenth century architectural designs created with cast iron
permitted the control of the population in a subtle fashion: with
clear, pre-established walkways for the visitors that were instantly

arranged according to the wishes of the designers, and large open spaces with elevated vantage points that allowed the public to watch over itself (Bennett, 1995:101). While the birth of the prison allowed punishment to be removed from the public scene, the museum provided its complement through its capacity to control an unstable crowd into "an ordered and, ideally, self-regulating public" (Bennett, 1995:99). This "civilizing" mission of "the masses" within the national framework was implemented through the "civilizing" discourse of the non Western world by European colonial powers.

Throughout the 19th century, colonial expansion allowed the development of disciplines such as archeology, geology, palaeontology, natural history, ethnography, and anthropology, all of which had a deep impact on the Western perception of the world. This increasing scientific organization of world knowledge came to progressively give priority to objects that were representative (i.e. common), rather than to objects that would be selected for their rarity. The ordering discourse still depended on the collectors, yet they were not acting in private anymore: the agency of collections reflected the state of beliefs of European scientists as a group, with its array of networks, exchange programs, and interests. Such beliefs, in turn, were combined with the interests of the State in justifying colonial expansion, through officially showcasing the history of humanity according to a narrative of progress. Darwin's theory, whereby natural evolutionary development led from simple to more complex forms of life, was applied to human matters (known as social Darwinism) and European colonialism, presented as the "evidence" of progress, was a natural stage of human history.

This discourse was first articulated for the public in the organization of colonial exhibitions. Visitors could marvel in front of the displays that highlighted the power of their nation overseas and absorb the national discourse according to which "inferior" peoples would "progress" accordingly through the gift of Western modernity. These colonial, temporary exhibitions proved highly popular and led to the development of colonial museums, such as

the Royal Museum of Belgian Congo, built on the initiative of King Leopold II after the colonial exhibition of 1897, and the Musée de la France d'outre-mer in Paris, following the 1931 colonial exhibition (Hodeir and Pierre, 1991). The latter lasted six months and attracted over 30 million visitors, which directly and indirectly allows an idea of the impact on the European population and the success of the government in using culture and leisure to promote industrial and economic interests. Most European nations entered the cultural competition of having an ethnographic collection within the walls of their museums. The presentation of a large section of humanity as "primitive peoples" was absolutely essential to the definition of Western nations at the apex of human history.

In other words, while the cabinets of curiosities of the Renaissance were about "controlling and thinking" in relation to the parameters of a discourse that were still yet to be produced, the modern museum was about "showing and educating" people in accordance with a pre-established discourse that would lead the activity of thinking towards predesigned conclusions about the position and status of indigenous peoples as opposed to the "white man" (the latter encompassing the bourgeois values that were conservative and therefore sexist in the gendered patterns of its exclusions).

## III. Exhibiting the colonial: museum discourse and the post-colonial realm

After the Second World War, criticism of colonial ideology took various forms and was effected by key happenings of the time period: the political process of independence in Asia and Africa, and the growing demands for social recognition from cultural minorities in North America and in Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia (Young, 2001; Hall, 1997). This "acceleration" and "democratization" of history reveals the extent to which the "national" framework was dominating due to colonial expansion: once colonization was officially over, the "national"

paradigm as a cultural model weakened and could not prevent other narratives, or histories, from entering the space of official discourse. As museums were assigned legitimacy and *raison d'être* as a national and a colonial tool, curators began to reflect on what kind of stories their exhibitions were telling and to progressively reconfigure such stories towards more contemporary views. In this exercise of reconfiguration lies the ability to renew their social purpose, which can no longer be sustained according to the 19th century narrative of progress and human hierarchy.

The first challenges, however, did not come from the museums, but from the previous colonies where Indigenous peoples could claim a right to be included in the national narrative. Indigenous leaders challenged museum authorities, calling into question the veracity of the stories within their walls (Commonwealth Association of Museums). For example, in Australia, Aboriginal communities and political leaders have fought since the late 1960s for a more respectful treatment of their ancestors' human remains and their heritage in general (Langford, 1983). Such events led the Council of Australian Museums Association in 1993 to endorse a document –eloquently entitled *Previous Possessions New Obligations*– that established new relationships between museums and Indigenous peoples by compelling the institutions to work collaboratively with Indigenous peoples on issues of collections management, preservation, exhibitions and institutional representations of their cultures, and through the encouragement of Indigenous curatorship. A similar process occurred with the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations who designed together the document *Turning the page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples'* in 1992, while New Zealand museum Te Papa embodies the ideals of the Treaty of Waitangi, that puts Maori people on equal footing.

This post-colonial reinterpretation of imperial history that has developed since the 1970s and has ultimately made an impact on curatorial practices is entitled "new museology". The reinterpretation is fully understandable as relative to the history of

collecting as a cultural practice throughout different periods of time. The "new museology" promotes museum work focused on individual and community cultural development rather than on a nation's greatness (Dodd and Sandell, 2001). Simultaneously, the "new museology" is, as Australian historian Graeme Davison rightly synthesizes, critical of 'the standard narrative of national history, and especially of its imperialist and racist components', and questions 'the racial and the evolutionary categories and hierarchies which previously governed the collection of museums' objects', and fosters 'the adoption of a pluralist, international perspective' (Mcintyre, 2001:18-19).

In this process, the discipline of history has played an increasing role. More and more museums now attempt historical exhibitions that are organized and presented as catalysts for change by revealing aspects of the large and complex history of European expansion that have previously been ignored. The progressive infiltration of a historical perspective to provide new ways of interpreting ethnographic collections informs us about how our colonial history has shaped our cultural identity and our understanding of the world. Such contextualization of previously established collections allows the museum to recover one of its former functions, that is to say, as a fulcrum for debate in which the final discourse is to be decided by the visitor, whose thinking is nurtured by the objects and the different discourses that have been given to them throughout time.

In certain countries, the transformation of the museum led to drastic changes. In Australia, for example, it meant that ethnographic collections needed to pass from the field of sciences to the field of humanities (Griffiths, 200:29). The implementation of such huge translations of discourse from the very collections that had been established for colonial purposes presented a serious issue. One way to deal with such collections was to use them as vehicles in the exhibition of the colonial (the settler and his ideas) rather than the colonized (Allen, 2000). As Aboriginal peoples entered the history narrative, museums started to work alongside the indigenous

groups in order to present their experience from a more accurate perspective. An additional step was to generate new collections so as to include the previously neglected Aboriginal contemporary history within the museum. Such actions implied that issues of social exclusion and adaptation were addressed constructively alongside the history of contact with the West, the survival of the Aboriginal peoples, and coexistence between Aboriginal peoples and descendants of colonial settlers (Allen, 2000; Miller, 2002).

In Europe, the cradle of western colonial ideology, changes have been slower and more uneven. However, it is certain that museums have been forced to renew themselves in order to survive. Such renovations have been visible through the incredible amount of ethnographic collections that have been closed and reopened, redesigned, moved from one museum to the other, and reshaped with an entirely new purpose. In Sweden, the previous Ethnographic Museum of Göteborg has been transformed into the Museum of World Culture. In Holland, the Tropenmuseum has replaced what began as the Colonial Museum of Haarlem, following the independence of Indonesia in 1949. In France, the Museum of Man and the Museum of African and Oceanian Arts (a former French colonial museum) closed their doors and were replaced by the new and internationally advertised Musée du Quai Branly, while the former colonial museum reopened as the "National Center for the History of Immigration" *(Cite nationale de l'histoire de l'Immigration).* In Belgium, the Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren is also undergoing important restructuring and is experiencing an interesting metamorphosis.

The Pitt Rivers Museum of Oxford, England opened in 1891 and has since retained its Victorian museography. The museum has also, however, radically changed its discourse. In fact, its displays are now so outdated that they challenge visitors to consider what the European practice of collecting has meant to colonized peoples. The Pitt Rivers has been transformed into a museum of what an ethnographic museum used to be, as well as a critique of 19th century museology. Another remarkable initiative was the British

Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, which provided the much needed historical context to understand present day cultural diversity within British society. Unfortunately, it closed its doors in 2008 and only plans to reopen, in London, after 2012. The only museum of its kind in Europe that presented the 500-year history and legacy of European empires (here the British case), the museum had opened in 2002 and was privately funded; it had become a much respected institution at national level and an essential aspect of the cultural and social life of the city. The case of these two museums demonstrates the interest, as well as the need, of civil society to obtain knowledge about colonial heritage and its present consequences, as well as the inability of Western Nation-states to provide such cultural and historical references to their citizens.

Such ongoing transformation signifies that at present, visitors experience a variety of discourses throughout Europe, and even within one museum, as temporary exhibitions depend on different curators and are of unequal quality in terms of the curators capacity to handle colonial heritage. A simple look at the presentation of current exhibitions reveals the variety within the present span of discourses. The Museum of World Cultures in Sweden, for example, proposes a critical self reflection on how one of its ethnographic collections was constituted, highlighting the impact of such practices:

> A STOLEN WORLD exhibition:
> The Museum of World Culture in Göteborg has custody of a collection of textiles known as the Paracas Collection. These textiles were discovered on the Paracas peninsula in Peru at the beginning of the 20th century. They are about 2,000 years old and come from looted graves... The exhibition describes how the textiles came to be in Göteborg, at the same time pointing out the consequences of looting for the world's heritage.

The discourse is visibly distant from the Eurocentric colonial narrative; the very title "a stolen world" and the term "looting" denounce the Western tendency to dispose of other peoples' cultural heritage. Alternatively, the Royal Africa Museum in

Belgium still displays a 19th century narrative for its temporary exhibition *Omo:*

> The Omo valley, located in south-western Ethiopia, is on Unesco's World Cultural Heritage List. It is the cultural crucible of a dozen nomad tribes that barely survive in an austere environment. It focuses on the esthetics of ordinary, everyday objects and explains the role played by them in a society constantly obliged to adapt itself to the laws of nature. Some magnificent portraits and pictures of body paintings complete the exhibit. This is all the work of Hans Silvester, who has been working in the Omo valley for several years.

Non-Western peoples are still retained as primitive peoples without technology, let alone intelligence (they "barely" survive), and their description is contrasted with the "magnificent" work of the Western photographer. The text implies that the Western society is not dependent on the "laws of nature", a discourse that has long been discredited worldwide and is particularly hard to sustain in the present context of ecological crisis and global warming. The lack of questioning of the 19th century narrative not only allows the survival of a discourse that is culturally obsolete; it also generates fundamental contradictions about the world in which we live, and our subsequent incapacity to relate to the world if it is not clearly within our realm of what we are able to understand.

*Conclusion*

Modern museums as we know them were composed according to a colonial paradigm. As a result, it is necessary for museums of all sizes to question the structure in which they operate to ensure that they do not retain the colonial model in their working practices, especially when they claim to work with non-Western cultures. The weakening of the national setting has allowed other layers of histories -local, regional, community, indigenous, minority- to be expressed. Such weakening comes to explain the need for a historical context to in-

form older ethnographic collections, as well as the necessity for the creation of historical collections of non-Western peoples alongside the older historical collections of Western cultures.

The previous use of museum space as a place where discourse and opinion remain to be established provides an enlightening example of how museums can be used once their colonial purposes are eliminated. In my opinion, if museums have been so successful in working with the very communities that they used to exclude, it is because they are rightly perceived as a "3D" version of the art of memory. Indeed, the experience of anthropologist James Clifford in the Portland Museum of Art is telling. Clifford recalls an occasion when Museum staff invited several Tlingit elders to discuss the museum's Northwest Coast Indian collection in 1989. To the surprise of most anthropologists and museum professionals, there was no discussion on the objects and their uses:

> In fact, the objects were not the subject of much direct commentary by the elders, who had their own agenda for the meeting. They referred to the regalia with appreciation and respect, but they seemed only to use them as aide-mémoires, occasions for the telling of stories and the singing of songs.

It is clear that the curators expected the objects to be addressed according to a colonial paradigm, hence their disappointment (expressed through the adverb "only") in the elders' evident lack of interest in discussing the objects in a more direct fashion. For the elders, the objects provided the text from which to produce a discourse in its proper order, that is, the much older human practice of recalling the past –the "absent thing"– through its present representations provided by the objects, thereby allowing the continuity of the cultural expression of their humanity throughout time.

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