

by Bongani Mkhonza

Relocating the Centre: Decolonising the University Art Collections in South Africa

The collection of art by South African universities was inherent to colonial practice and central to this was a Eurocentric, colonial logic of classification and justification. As a decolonial project, I argue for the relocation of that particular centrality and question the *situatedness*—the epistemic involvement within a particular space or context—of the philosophies that inform the university art collections in South Africa (Daniel and Greytak 2013; Mignolo 2003; Walsh 2007). I then argue that, because of the legacy of colonialism in Africa, the tastes and aesthetics of art collected by university art collections are still largely influenced by Eurocentric epistemologies and their imagination of Africa (Mungazi 2005). In South Africa, like in many other former European colonies, “the production of knowledge [...], has long been subject to colonial and imperial designs, to geopolitics that universalizes European thought as scientific truths, while subalternising and invisibilising other epistemes” (Walsh 2007: 224). Under the guise of neutrality and the universality of philosophies, as shaped by postcolonial theories “provocative arguments have been advanced to the effect [that] African philosophies were very few [...] moreover, were a reaction to colonialist imagination of Africa as an ahistorical and dark space that is bereft of humanity” (Mpfungu 2014: 1-25). This article derives its theoretical lens from the decolonial advancements pioneered by influential scholars from cultural, feminist, and postcolonial studies, mostly from Latin America and the global South.

Art collecting in South Africa, mapping the colonial logic

The multiple meanings ascribed to objects gathered for supply and storage in museums emerge from different theoretical perspectives and diverse fields, like ethnography, anthropology and material culture theory. The elements from which meanings can be derived broaden the scope of museum studies and allow for objects and artefacts to be interpreted and reinterpreted from a wide range of theoretical approaches so as to deepen the knowledge on the items kept (Antoš 2014: 115-128). John Mackenzie examines in detail the origins and development of museums in six former British Empire colonies, including South Africa, in the 19th and 20th centuries (2009: XV-272). He exposes the political and ideological reasoning behind the question of why museums collect. He posits that museums are not neutral cultural spaces, but have policies, either formal or informal, designed around particular ideologies. Pointing to the power relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, Davis argues that imperial powers often collect, define, classify, and represent the cultures of the colonies in a predetermined way so as to create a particular way of thinking about the coloniser and colonised.

In South Africa, based on colonial logic, museums in Cape Town always made clear distinctions between artefacts of natural history, ethnography, and cultural history, and even housed them in different buildings. Furthermore, as noted by Elizabeth Rankin, “White culture had been separated from ethnographic material” (2013: 80 et seq).

Rankin demonstrates how in South Africa such cultural traditions were reconfigured, especially after 1994: “The Social History Museum, which had since 1960 represented European settler history (together with some antiquities), has set that material aside and been redeveloped as the Slave Lodge Museum—the original function of the building it occupied” (2013: 72–98).

According to William Simmons, the colonial method of categorising cultural artefacts reflected “an expression of the widespread ethnocentric idea that one’s society is the norm and what lies outside is a distortion of that standard” (1988: 1). From this perspective, it becomes clear how “historians and anthropologists have interpreted the encounters between Europeans and native people” (Simmons 1988: 1). Examples of such collections of history, artefacts and cultures are exhibited in ethnographic museums to this day and some researchers still use these collections and exhibitions to produce knowledge about those cultures. Such prevailing knowledge systems are shaped by a European bias towards colonised native cultures; something that my arguments in this article seek to counter. In line with my perspective, Lynda Kelly (2006) affirms that:

Museums, their missions, their civic, social responsibilities, and their modes of engagement with communities are in a constant process of transformation in response to social and economic imperatives at local, national and global levels. There is a need for museums to stay relevant and be responsive to pressing social and environmental issues such as population and sustainability, social justice, and Indigenous rights (2006:1).

To this end, it is important to measure the impact of museums and art galleries on the cultural wealth of society.

On the ontology of why art is collected by museums

The history of art collections is closely linked both to the reason behind the collection and the historical period in which it occurred. My intention is, from a rational frame of reference, to examine the way in which university museums play a major role in institutionalising the conception of a collection (Macdonald 2006). The process of collecting by museums in general “recontextualise[s] objects [...] collecting removes objects from their original contexts and places them in the new context of the collection [...], this re-contextualisation of objects primarily in terms of other objects with which they are considered to be related, is a fundamental aspect of the kind of collecting legitimised by the museum” (Macdonald 2006: 82). In this sense, from its inception, the act of collecting involved context and meaning-making so the idea that artworks are intentionally or unintentionally re-contextualised by museums through an act of collecting is not new. Tony Bennett (1995) states:

The space of the museum [...] thus becomes one in which art, in being abstracted from real-life contexts, is depoliticized. The museum, in sum, constitutes a specific form of art's enclosure which, in Crimp's postmodernist perspective, art must break with in order to become once more socially and politically relevant (1995: 92).

According to Bennett "the origins and early history of the public museum an institution on whose distinguishing characteristics crystallized during the first half of the nineteenth century" (1995: 92). I consider Bennett's genealogy of a museum as a tracing line to suggest that museum artefact collection was also formalised around the same timeline. This claim is also highlighted by Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown (2005):

During the great age of museum collecting which began in the mid-nineteenth century, this was a one-way relationship: objects and information about them went from peoples all over the world into museums, which then consolidated knowledge as the basis of curatorial and institutional authority. Often this relationship was predicated on another set of relationships, between museums as institutions within imperial powers and source communities in colonised regions (2005: 1).

The advancements given by Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown (2005); Theodor Adorno (1967); Douglas Crimp (1985) and Anne Coombes (1988) on why museums collect artefacts provide clear evidence to construct a thesis to address the question at hand. The question of how the collecting processes were organised in ways in which progress became synonymous with colonialism. Here, I rely on my considerations of René Descartes' *Second Meditation* (Beck 1965) to map the genealogy of museums to their practice of collecting objects and artefacts, and their colonial justification. I consider Cartesian philosophy to be fundamental in the modelling of the paradoxical power relationship which privileges the European thinking "mind" over the non-European peripheral "body" (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 240-270). In accordance with this philosophy, the notions of a modern museum were framed by the European thinking "mind" situated at the centre as the apparatus to be used to collect, arrange, classify and study the cultures of the non-European "exotic" periphery. The paradoxical relationship between the mind and its material existence, as elaborated in Cartesian philosophy, is at the heart of the question: why do museums collect objects and artefacts? The Cartesian propensity to separate the thinking mind from the body creates hierarchies of importance within itself. The mind is positioned at an active level, which allows it to process thinking that creates certainty about its existence and enables it to produce knowledge about the body.

While this perspective prevails, the epistemic sustenance of the former colonial museums and their art collections can never be conceived outside of this Western philosophical logic, which, as part of its colonial mission, must by definition misrepresent non-European cultures. The main purpose of art collecting, as seen from a typically conservative European mind, was to capture and create new ethnographic knowledge systems about the non-European-colonised other, which would, later on, be used to query their humanity. This Eurocentric logic can be interrogated to a great degree through the works of authors such as Cole (1985); Griffiths (1996); Schildkrout, Keim (1998); Krech, Hail (1999); O'Hanlon, Welsch (2000). Thus,

“within this context, ethnographic collections, in particular, were built up on the premise that the peoples whose material heritage was being collected were dying out, and that the remnants of their cultures should be preserved for the benefit of future generations [of the Empire]” (Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown 2005: 1). Hitherto, the agenda was to maximise the prospect of successful conquest and mastery of the non-European other. For example, in the so-called former southeast Belgian Congo, colonial “administrative officers were expected to spend 20 days per month in the bush and were encouraged to publish their ethnographic impressions in one of the Belgian Congo’s numerous ‘native affairs’ journals” (Young 1965: 12). David Maxwell goes further to reveal that in the Congo “a strong impetus to collect and classify came from the Belgian museums..., and the colonial museum in Tervuren” (Maxwell 2008: 325-351). Put differently, Maldonado-Torres asserts that “the Cartesian idea about the division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (consciousness and matter) which translates itself into a divide between the mind and the body or between the human and nature is preceded and [...] built upon an anthropological colonial difference” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 240-270). The colonial powers collected artefacts from the colonised societies and cultures for their development. This model was perfected using museums and “it became a model of power, as it were, or the very basis of what was then going to become modern identity” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 244).

Museums and art collections in general are institutions of power and knowledge production. According to Maldonado-Torres, after the knowledge systems that create hierarchies in understanding humanity were produced, “the whole world was practically seen in the light of this logic” (2007: 243). Corresponding with the model of Euro-colonial advancements—as asserted by Emmanuel Arinze in a 1999 public lecture in Guyana—it goes without saying that “over the years the museum culture has spread to nearly every part of the world and today it has become uncommon to find any country that does not have a museum.” I draw parallel arguments with Maldonado-Torres’s (2007) theory on coloniality, which asserts that:

The Cartesian idea about the division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (consciousness and matter) which translates itself into a divide between the mind and the body or between the human and nature is preceded and even, one has the temptation to say, to some extent built upon an anthropological colonial difference between the *ego conquistador* and the *ego conquistado* (2007: 245).

For Maldonado:

The very relationship between colonizer and colonized provided a new model to understand the relationship between the soul or mind and the body; and likewise, modern articulations of the mind/body are used as models to conceive the colonizer/colonized relation, as well as the relation between man and woman, particularly the woman of color [...] this difference translates itself into European and non-European and into lighter and darker peoples (2007: 244).

Franz Fanon refers to the above scenario as a relationship between people in the “zone of being and in the zone of non-being” (1963: 2).

Within this context, it is worth noting that in the “post-colonial” era, museums around the world and, especially in the former colonies, have been changing their epistemic position about the power relations that symbolised where they started. Arinze, for example, in the 1999 public lecture mentioned above, advocates for a transformed version of a museum:

In our modern society, it has become necessary and indeed urgent for museums to redefine their missions, their goals, their functions, and their strategies to reflect the expectations of a changing world. Today [it is advocated that], museums must become agents of change and development: they must mirror events in society and become instruments of progress by calling attention to actions and events that will encourage development in the society [...]. They must become part of the bigger communities that they serve and reach out to every group in the society (1999: 1-2).

Arinze’s assertion demonstrates that the epistemic colonial residue that is still reflected in the image of museums can no longer be sustained. His proclamation is a call for the transformation of museums, that is, the transformation of not only the image but also the plural epistemic representation of objects, artefacts, and artworks. Such transformation, however, should not conceal what John Comaroff calls “the tensions and contradictions of colonialism” (1989: 661-685). The transformation of both the image and the representation of museum content henceforth paves the way for immediate in-depth exploration of theoretical insights on Africa from both sides of the proverbial fence. Other scholars, such as Dubin (2009), Mudimbe (1988), Mungazi (2005) and Wilkinson (2000), suggest that during colonialism African artefacts were archaeologically excavated, collected and exported to museums in Europe to be studied and appreciated ethnocentrically. This, coupled with other more abrasive cultural assimilation methods, altered the way African culture was created, seen, read, and interpreted. This modification extended colonisation to the aestheticisation of art in Western terms. Henceforth, studies produced during this era mostly depicted African art as inferior, primitive, or absurdly romanticised.

For instance, some European philosophers used their experiences to develop, for the first time in history, particular ways of seeing and reading African cultures.

Among the critics of such philosophers, Kwame Botwe-Asamoah singles out two in particular: “prominent among such infamous European scholars were the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, and the nineteenth-century German philosopher, Georg Hegel” (2005: 6). Hegel’s thinking on Africa was strongly influenced by the school of theological rationalism and its thinkers including Rousseau, Lessing, Kant, Hermann, Johann Herder, and Heinrich Paulus. Hegel states: “this is the land where men are children, a land lying beyond the daylight of self-conscious history, and enveloped in the black colour of night. At this point, let us forget Africa not to mention it again [...], Africa is no historical part of the world” (1956: 99).

However, what is worth noting is that such philosophies developed tools of analysing African art and cultures that were not there before colonialism. Some argue that these tools of analysis assisted in making visible to the Europeans, and to the Africans, the fields of culture

that, before colonialism, had never been conceived of outside of their original contexts. The perspectives as debated demonstrate that over the years, colonial thinking has immersed itself deep into the museum collections. Interestingly, it also remains unimaginable to me to abandon the discourse and practices that maintain the foundations of the museum in Europe as a centre and its former colonies as the periphery of the same postcolonial structure. To this end, African art produced in the pre-colonial era, during the colonial and postcolonial era remains under the Eurocentric institutional structures and laws of aesthetics in terms of its philosophical readings, its intrinsic value, and its interpretation.

I believe that Afrocentric philosophies have an ability to frame the new reading of art produced in postcolonial Africa. Along with Molefi Asante I contend that Afrocentricity, as a process “of thinking from where you are”, has the capacity to renew our contact with Africa, and to lead us into a greater and more intimate appreciation of the cultures and peoples of the continent (1993: 62). Scholars working within Afrocentricity have “in trying to reconstruct African thought by evaluative analyses of its intellectual foundations, shown how there can be a different and more worthwhile way to identify what is authentically African about African thought and therefore African art” (Wilkinson 2000: 293). Going forward, researchers need to ask themselves, what do these polemics around the collection of art mean for the future of university art collections?

‘Situatdness’: Debunking the illusion of neutrality towards Afrocentricity

The arguments raised in this article are part of the negotiated process of exploring possibilities beyond the Eurocentric epistemic position. I employed decolonial critical perspectives to explore the geopolitics of philosophies used to determine what is collected in university art collections. The construction of my arguments was mainly informed by the ongoing discourse on “decolonising the Westernized university” and its museums’ management policies as put forward by Grosfoguel, Hernández, and Rosen Velásquez (2016).

My contention was premised upon the claim that the injustice has been perpetrated by the way Eurocentric philosophies have, as Catherine Walsh puts it, “historically worked to subordinate and negate ‘other’ frames, ‘other’ knowledge, and ‘other’ subjects and thinkers” (2007: 224). Walsh supports this claim by asserting that, “to speak of the geopolitics of knowledge and the geopolitical locations of critical thought is to recognise the persistence of a Western hegemony that positions Eurocentric thought as universal while localising other forms of thought as at best folkloric” (2007: 225). And African cultures have been for many years portrayed by museums in general in this inferior fashion.

Aimé Césaire, in the 1960’s, pioneered the movement of scholars which objected to the positioning of Eurocentric thought as universal, while stagnating and localising African thought and imagination to just ethnographic data that existed outside of any philosophy. Césaire viewed Eurocentric knowledge as provincial rather than absolute, thus asserting: “I’m not going to confine myself to some narrow particularism” (Césaire 1972: 84). In my deliberations, I have explored the geopolitics of knowledge systems, and as a result am proposing Afrocentricity as the philosophy upon which universities in Africa could anchor

their acquisition of artworks. However, it is important to point out that I am not proposing Afrocentricity as an alternative to Eurocentrism, but rather as a way to examine the agency of Africa. As Molefi Asante (200) asserts:

The idea of examining African phenomena from the standpoint of Africans as human agents is not a reactionary idea, but rather the only correct and normal way to engage the information [...], it is not Eurocentrism that gives rise to Afrocentric perspective but rather the idea of Africans speaking for themselves. While it is true that dominant interpretations of Africa have been Eurocentric, the Afrocentric response would have been necessary regardless of the previous centricities (2002: 97).

According to Asante (1993), as cited in Houessou-Adin (1995: 188), “non-hegemonic, it is not a philosophy that blindly claims African superiority over other cultures [...] [but rather] posit[s] that it is possible that many perspectives cohabit, live side by side” (1995: 185-200). According to Ayele Bakerie “the idea of centeredness finds perhaps its most dynamic articulation and movement in the theory and praxis of Afrocentricity” (1994: 131–149). Afrocentricity as a paradigm of thought

recognises the need to look at Africa’s cultures and history from their own centres or locations [...], it is a proposition to validate, regenerate, create, and perpetuate African life and living whole and unhindered, informed by African perspective or world outlook (Bakerie 1994: 131–149).

Asante further says: “the theory posits that African peoples are active, primary, and central agents in the making of their histories.” Afrocentricity has its African history, philosophies, and indigenous knowledge systems; however, cultural policies in Africa do not take into consideration the possibility of centring art collections on such African thought (Asante quoted in Bekerie (1997: 12).

Bongani Mkhonza has been working as a Curator for the UNISA Art Gallery and Art Collection for ten years. Before that Mkhonza worked as an Educational Officer for the Durban Art Gallery, in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. His curatorial experience includes caring for the UNISA Art Collection. Moreover, Mkhonza attends to a variety of professional duties such as operational planning, budgeting, management, coordinating, and administrative duties for the Gallery. Mkhonza has curated art exhibitions nationally in South Africa and travelled some of the exhibitions internationally in Austria, Serbia in other countries in Europe. He completed his PhD in Art History and Philosophy in 2020 (UNISA). His research interests are on university art collections and their art acquisition policies. In his capacity as a curator, he maintains and reports on a broad spectrum of advisory and acquisition committees. Mkhonza has also produced catalogues for international exhibitions and the UNISA art collection. In his professional career which spans over 20 years, he has been committed to working in a field that promotes South African contemporary art. Moreover, he admires the contribution that the university art collections continue to make in the curation

and preservation of diverse cultures in South Africa.

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