

Exhibiting Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico: a decolonial comparative analysis of permanent displays in the British Museum and the Museo Nacional de Antropología

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Abstract

A recent turn towards incorporating decolonial approaches into museum theory and practice has been identified in scholarly literature as well as advocacy by activist movements to “decolonise the museum”. This research investigates how two state museums have responded to such changes: the British Museum, in the United Kingdom, and the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. Both display Indigenous cultural heritage objects from Mexico to the public. This paper considers how they may reproduce colonialist curatorial tendencies in their exhibiting of Indigeneity, through the curation and interpretation of these permanent displays and their reception by audiences. Through a comparative analysis of the permanent displays, this research uncovers the extensive influence of engrained colonialist epistemologies that persist across both institutions, utilising desk-based research methods as well as first-hand qualitative data from interviews as well as surveys collected through fieldwork at the British Museum. The findings reveal disparities between the two examples, reflective of their unique national museological contexts and respective state ideologies. Yet, despite differences in each nation’s relationship with coloniality, both museums contribute to the perpetuation of colonialist ideologies through biased misrepresentations and stereotypical narratives of Indigeneity, ultimately marginalising the source communities from which the items originate. Thus, this thesis also introduces a framework for understanding possible institutional responses in the context of decolonising and underscores the pressing need for change in both institutions, exploring adaptation, addition, abolition, and interventions as potential strategies.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
INAH	Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
INALI	Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía
IWGIA	International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
PCS	Public and Commercial Services Union
MNA	Museo Nacional de Antropología
SDCELAR	Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

Introduction

This thesis intends to explore the exhibition of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico within the current context of calls to “decolonise the museum”. To do so, it will employ a comparative analysis of two state museums: the British Museum, in the United Kingdom, and the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. The British Museum and the Museo Nacional de Antropología (MNA) serve as comparable examples, as both are national survey museums of similar standing, each considered a heralded cultural institution in their respective countries. As public institutions, they share a similar objective to showcase archaeological and ethnographic cultural production in large, grand buildings built to welcome millions of visitors each year.

In the British Museum, there is one room dedicated to the permanent display of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico. On the ground floor, you can exit the Great Court and walk through two other galleries to find Room 27, or the “Mexico Gallery”. It is one of only two galleries that exhibit the Museum’s “Americas” collection. Next door, Room 26 displays “North America”. Therefore, Mexico is the only Latin American nation permanently represented in the British Museum – an institution that intends to showcase all world cultures. Contrastingly, Prehispanic cultural heritage is the sole focus of the permanent displays in the Museo Nacional de Antropología. Visitors can find 21 permanent halls of Indigenous cultural production from Mexico, 11 of which contain archaeology from the Prehispanic era. With a more extensive exhibition of Indigenous cultural heritage, this thesis considers whether the MNA might reveal lessons to be learnt about improving representations of Indigenous communities from this region which could be implemented in the British Museum’s Mexico Gallery.

Behind the public displays, these museums both hold major collections of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico. Despite the similar provenance of the objects, different curatorial impulses are seen in their exhibition. As a national museum in the Global North, the British Museum’s approach to exhibiting non-European cultures shows a clear influence of Eurocentric thought and trends in Anglo European museology. The Museo Nacional de Antropología, conversely, may offer a Mexican perspective, as a museology developed in the nation from which the cultural production originates. That is, it could be considered more to be displaying its

own national heritage. Therefore, it is expected that this thesis will uncover differences in their approaches to exhibiting Prehispanic cultural heritage, if not least for the major practical differences like proximity to the histories, politics, and objects themselves.

In situating the two examples in the context of decolonising, the most pronounced difference to be recognised between the United Kingdom and Mexico is their relationship with colonialism. The United Kingdom has a colonial past as a colonising force, with an extensive imperial history, in which the British Empire exerted power over much of the globe from the seventeenth to nineteenth century. This primarily targeted areas of Africa, North America, Oceania and Asia. Whilst the majority of the continent of Central and South America was under Iberian control rather than British, the British Empire did establish some colonies in the region: British Honduras, British Guyana, the Falkland Islands and then Mosquito Coast, as well as some areas of the Caribbean (however, for clarity, they did not exercise authority over Mexico, the subject of this thesis). The nation's imperial control waned in the latter half of the twentieth century, and its decline culminated in the returning of the colony of Hong Kong to China in 1997, which many marked as the formal end of empire. However, as a member of the Global North and a monarchy who leads the Commonwealth, the United Kingdom remains bound up in colonialist entanglements in the present day.

Conversely, Mexico has a different relationship with coloniality. Then part of a wider Mesoamerican culture that spanned Central America, in 1519 the region was colonised by Spanish colonial forces, after an expedition by Hernán Cortés. Conquest was not instant, but the fall of Aztec centre Tenochtitlán in 1521 is often regarded as the beginning of a colonial period that lasted three hundred years, in which Indigenous communities were victims of colonialism. Under control of the Spanish Empire, Indigenous peoples were subjugated, their cosmological beliefs were deemed heretic, and Prehispanic cultures, and their cultural heritage, were destroyed. Modern borders were put in place as the region now known as "Mexico" claimed formal independence in 1821. In an independent Mexican state, Indigeneity has survived, but individuals still face oppression and remain marginalised. Whilst a new national government displaced colonial forces, they still acted in accordance with similar hierarchies of power and control, under which Indigenous peoples are still subjugated. Though no longer under overt control of colonialism, traumatic legacies persist and can be seen entangled in the Mexican

national identity and character today. For example, contemporary Indigeneity reflects the period of colonial occupation, thereby complicating terms of "Indigenous" and "Mexican" when applied to personal identity.¹ The two terms are not synonymous. Many Mexican people are not Indigenous, and distinctions may be drawn between an individual's Mexican nationality and their identification with Indigenous communities or cultures. As such, this thesis intends to investigate the two examples to determine whether they might respectfully reflect a nuanced illustration of the complex nature of Indigeneity, as museums are tasked with sharing histories of the complicated impact of colonialist frameworks in the world today.

The United Kingdom and Mexico do not have a significant direct relationship in terms of their respective colonial histories. The two nations may typically be considered at odds with each other, in the way they illustrate the extremes of roles associated with experiences of coloniality: the colonisers and the colonised. Yet, despite this differing relationship with colonial histories, parallels can also be found between both nations and their relationships with culture. In the present day, the use of concepts of "culture" for political or power gains is evident in the cultural sphere. In both contexts, the contemporary national environment of "culture wars" is clear. Cultural heritage is being employed as an inflammatory tool, to spark arguments and illustrate wider ideological disagreements between both ends of the political spectrum. Of late in the United Kingdom, there have been media frenzies over statues, with contentious coverage considering their embedded colonial histories and place in contemporary Britain, culminating in campaigns like Rhodes Will Fall (in 2015) or actions like the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol in response to the Black Lives Matter movement (in 2020). Similar instances can be found in Mexico. Protests around the Paseo de la Reforma statue were also in response to the same Black Lives Matter campaign, where feminist activists replaced a statue of Christopher Columbus in Mexico City with an "anti-monument" dedicated to women and justice (Escalante-De Mattei, 2022).

¹ The 2020 Census noted that 11.8 million people live in Indigenous households in Mexico, though in 2019 research by the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas indicated that around 25 million people self-identified as Indigenous (INEGI, 2020; INALI, 2019), comparative to its current population of 128.5 million (UNFPA, 2023).

With the prevalence of discussions surrounding cultural heritage in the popular consciousness, museums are also being called into question. As public institutions that hold and share important examples of cultural heritage, they are able to create and disseminate hegemonic narratives to large audiences. Their power to do so has been interrogated by the recent movement to decolonise the museum. To “decolonise” is an act that combines critical thinking and practical action to challenge and change institutions conceived in, and therefore influenced by, colonialist thought and structures. In the past decade, the museum has been challenged by decolonial thinkers and activists, disrupting their Eurocentric and colonialist legacies and tendencies, and the “myth of neutrality” that has protected them from such criticism in the past (Murawski, 2017).

Through the centring of Enlightenment knowledge frameworks and concepts of rational thought, it is only white, western, Anglo European knowledge that is presented as universal. In this logic, it follows that anything that falls outside of those boundaries is deemed irrational and a deviation from the norm, thereby marginalising alternative, or non-European, systems of thought. But, as Quijano (1992, p.13) warns, we should be wary of the assumption that the European cultural model is reflective of a wholly "universal cultural model". Thinkers such as Sentance (2018) and Moore (2014) have applied such concepts to the museological institution. This recognition in scholarship has come alongside actions by activists, like the “#MuseumsAreNotNeutral” online campaign by Autry and Murawski, using social media advocacy to encourage open and accessible conversation around the ability of museums to foster unequal power relations in wider society (Autry, 2017). Such conversations have also seeped into popular culture, such as the increasingly commonplace coverage of recent controversies in the British Museum about their relationship with nations demanding the return of “stolen” objects, such as the Parthenon Marbles or Benin Bronzes.

As conversations about repatriation proliferate in the academic and popular sphere, this project will employ an alternative focus for analysis. The topic has been rightfully well covered in scholarly literature. This research recognises that restitution is not a debate and does not wish to add to that conceptual understanding of it as such. Its lack of sustained analysis here is not to undermine or ignore its importance, but to indicate that repatriation ought to be accepted as a given to underline all conversations of decolonial museum practice. In the meantime, however,

as institutions like the British Museum refuse to enact any rapid fundamental change in their response to repatriation calls, this thesis interrogates the museums as they presently are, in order to underscore the necessity there is for them to change.

To do so, this analysis will concentrate on the permanent displays in each museum. Both museums have also offered temporary exhibits on Mexican themes. The MNA has a regular rotation of exhibits, many of which are often focused on the region. For example, the most recent projects advertised for 2022/23 were "Proyecto Teotihuacán. Sesenta años" and "Escultura y tiempo. África, América y Oceanía". The British Museum offers less specific exhibits focused on Mexico. Since the major exhibition "Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler" in the Reading Room in 2009/10, there have been a few minor exhibitions and no major exhibits on Mexican themes (British Museum, 2023a; Bowring, 2012).² In fact, Latin America generally is largely underrepresented in the exhibition schedule. Beyond the recent "Peru: a journey in time" exhibition in 2021/22, little else associated with the region has been the focus of temporary exhibits.

Both due to this lack of recent temporary exhibitions, and to adopt a novel approach, this research will not consider temporary exhibitions. Instead, it will consider the foundational displays alongside which the newer, often more innovative temporary exhibitions are found. As Muñoz Reed (2016, p.15) identifies, there has been a "decolonial turn" within the museums and galleries field in the past decade. A self-aware shift in the sector towards acknowledging colonial origins has resulted in temporary exhibits and events that claim to challenge institutions. Whilst disruptive, these interventions are ephemeral. They are offered only as additive options for audiences to engage with alongside largely unchanged permanent displays. Thus, this research considers it fundamental to instead contribute to a re-evaluation of the permanent exhibition spaces alongside existing research into temporary exhibits, and to consider how myths and narratives about Indigeneity may continue to be disseminated to visitors through pre-existing exhibition halls, ultimately contradicting trendy, but shallow, temporary interventions within the decolonial turn.

² A gap in the literature on temporary exhibits in the British Museum does exist between these two sources, in the period of 2012 to 2018. However, no other reference can be found to any relevant exhibitions during this time.

The first two chapters will focus on each museum separately. To begin, the first chapter will identify the historical foundations and functions of the British Museum before analysing their Mexico Gallery, through the lens of both its curation and interpretation as well as visitor engagement and experience. It will then consider potential futures and changes in the Museum, given the current context of its upcoming major refurbishment, the Rosetta Project. The second chapter will then move to the Museo Nacional de Antropología, again considering its foundational canons and epistemologies before analysing how the curation and interpretation of its permanent displays may represent Mexican narratives of national identity and *indigenismo*. The third and final chapter will present a framework for understanding “alternative approaches”, evaluating past and present internal and external interventions in both museums and their use in disrupting and decolonising institutional biases.

As Villegas describes, the museum as an institution follows an "outdated, nineteenth-century model [...] that ends up silencing, invisibilizing and residualizing the entire cultural ecosystem and epistemic racialized experiences that do not fit within colonial paradigms" (Villegas and Sissokho, 2020). This thesis will consider this statement in its comparison between the examples of the British Museum and the Museo Nacional de Antropología. Does this model still exist in the British Museum today, in its exhibition of Indigenous Latin American communities? If so, does the Museo Nacional break free of this model to provide an alternative museology that might be followed as an example? If not, how can both museums be situated in the movement to decolonise?

In this way, this thesis intends to answer the question posited by the research project: how and why do British and Mexican state museums compare in their approaches to exhibition of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico, amidst calls to decolonise the museum?

Methodology

A comparative framework has been employed in this thesis, with the aim of illuminating how Eurocentricism may persist or vary across global examples through contrasting an Anglo European and Latin American institution. The differences between them will encourage a critical examination of best practice in a decolonial curation of Indigeneity, and their similarities will demonstrate the extensive and pervasive influence of European Enlightenment thought in museums as institutions across the globe.

These two subjects, which form the primary case studies in this thesis, are the British Museum (London, UK) and the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Mexico City, Mexico). Within the scope of this project, this research has been largely desk-based in the United Kingdom. I was able to visit both museums myself in the capacity of a visitor in 2022 and 2023. I was able to carry out fieldwork in the British Museum in the form of surveys and interviews which underwent approval by ethical review.

Within secondary data analysis of existing scholarship and sources, I recognise the importance of inclusive citation, and consider both academic and so-called “grey” literature. Inclusive citation was introduced by Bali (2020) and has since been accepted into decolonial practice by academics and activists, such as the Cite Black Women Collective (Smith et al., 2021). In this thesis, there is an effort to actively engage with Spanish source texts, as a way to disrupt the Anglophone “power centre” within museum studies, in which Brulon Soares and Leshchenko (2018, pp.64-5) describe Latin America as particularly underrepresented in published scholarship.

In decolonial theory there has been increased discussion around the ethics of participatory research and the morality behind researcher-participant relationships, particularly when that relationship reflects existing unequal power dynamics (e.g. non-Indigenous Western researcher working with Indigenous participants). There could be a risk, due to my positionality as a white British researcher and not from a Mexican nor Indigenous community, of the research project being extractivist rather than reciprocal, and community-led.

It is essential to acknowledge my own researcher positionality as it inherently informs my perspective on the research topic. I am a white British postgraduate researcher, studying at university in the UK. I do not have firsthand experience of being marginalised or discriminated against due to my ethnicity, nationality or racial identity. I do not have personal experience with the cultural heritage items or histories discussed in this thesis. I am afforded privileges that are stripped from others of different countries, cultures and backgrounds. It is necessary to address this, to make clear to the reader the influence my own background will have on my approach to research and make open admittance that I am more of an outsider than a member of the community at the heart of this discussion.

This risks the research itself reproducing colonizing tendencies in the relationship between the researcher and researched (Smith, 2012, p.x). It was beyond the scope of this project to build the ideal respectful, reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities in Mexico as is found in other collaborative methodologies, like those outlined by Velasquez Runk (2014), or the co-authorship used by other scholars in Indigenous research such as Nelson and Pitman (2020, p.2). However, the research methodologies for this project have been chosen to ensure the project is multi-vocal, collaborative, and reflective of the decolonial principles it analyses, instead of proposing itself, or the author, as a singular authoritative voice.

I highlight the importance of the inclusion of survey and interview responses in this project as an opportunity for a multivocal aspect, as afforded by the scope of the project, to ensure that those impacted by the research (whose heritage is on display, and who use the museums themselves) have a chance to make their opinions heard in the research outputs. Where western academia traditionally may disregard subjective perspectives as “unscientific”, this project intends to recognise the value of opinions and lived experiences of individuals and communities impacted by the topics discussed through consideration of audience engagement and community outreach alongside curation. Thus, voices on the visitor experience are reflected in the collection of qualitative primary data.

Fieldwork at the British Museum consisted of collecting feedback from 65 randomly selected members of the public visiting the Mexico Gallery from 27 to 29 May 2023. This was collected through self-completion questionnaires of sixteen open and closed questions, as well as some further informal, unstructured interviews. With a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, I

processed the raw data using social sciences coding methods. The methodology for such analysis primarily followed those outlined by Saldaña (2020) in his chapter on qualitative data analysis strategies in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. This consisted mainly of grounded coding, allowing patterns to emerge themselves rather than applying a pre-existing framework. This helped facilitate the values coding, a methodology which enables analysis to infer the values, attitudes, and beliefs of participants, and discern patterns in worldviews and opinions. This was carried out using manual human analysis, given the small sample size. This method tends to produce more nuanced results, due to its perceived high accuracy, though it can be prone to bias. For this reason, the research participants were anonymised prior to analysis, and are identifiable throughout this thesis solely by their numerical marker.

The sample of research participants was randomly selected, but statistics show it is relatively representative of typical audiences in the British Museum. 32% had visited before, 68% were first-time visitors. 35% lived in the UK; 60% did not (5% did not respond). This aligns with the typical trend of audiences in the British Museum being overwhelmingly tourists, visiting from abroad, rather than home audiences.

When asked to identify their ethnicity in their own words, statistical analysis does reveal that the sample was predominantly white: 48%. Of this group, this included White British (23%), White European (23%), North American (39%), and unspecified (16%). A substantial proportion of the entire sample identified as North American (28%). Some respondents identified as Latinx (9%), with some identifying as Mexican specifically (6%). Overall, 15% of the sample identified as British when asked their ethnicity; interestingly, this means many respondents who live in the UK chose not to identify as “British” primarily.

Structured interviews were carried out from March to April 2023 with staff members and other experts identified as having relevant experience and insight on the research topic. From the British Museum, I spoke to Stuart Green, the Head of Interpretation and Volunteers, and a Visitor Services staff member (anonymised by the pseudonym “Elena”) on the PCS (Public and Commercial Services Union) picket line in April. I also spoke to Ian Mursell and Graciela Sánchez, co-founders of independent teaching team “Mexicolore” which has worked with the British Museum in the past. They have been delivering specialist educational services about Prehispanic cultural heritage from Mexico for over forty years across the UK. Graciela is from

Mexico, and Ian from the UK. I thank Daniel Salinas Córdova, the final interviewee for this project, for the introduction to Mexicolore and discussion of the fundamental angle of labour across both museums (Salinas Córdova, 2021). Daniel is an independent researcher from Mexico based in the UK, and his research outputs cover heritage, history and archaeology from both regions, and has delved into both specific museums analysed in this thesis.³

As I was unable to travel to undertake fieldwork in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, it was beyond the scope of this project to parallel the visitor survey responses collected in the British Museum. However, in further research, I hope it would be possible to collect more data to support the comparative analysis between the two institutions as well as include a wider range of participants to input into the research topic.

In addressing the voices of visitors and source communities, this project recognises the integral value of the public in research about museums, which exist as public institutions. Without reception by audiences, an exhibition is inherently limited. Further, without communities to create the heritage it displays, there would be no exhibition at all.

³ See Moreiras Reynaga et al. (2022) for his contribution to research on the Maya and the British Museum.

Literature Review

Decolonial theory emerged from Latin America in the late twentieth century. The school of thought, led by key thinkers Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, and Walter D. Mignolo, has since impacted a growing decolonial movement with global reach. Its impact extends both within and beyond academia, as decoloniality employs both analytic and practical methods. Mignolo (2011) elaborates on the movement's dual focus on theory and praxis in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, one of the movement's foundational texts. In this book, he proposes the concept of decoloniality as both a political and intellectual project. Decolonial theory concentrates on how colonial legacies still impact the production of knowledge, and so it seeks to challenge systemic marginalisation of epistemologies found outside of European ideals, especially those of Indigenous peoples and racialised communities. Such structural biases are most often revealed within institutions that maintain and produce knowledge, such as universities, schools, and museums.

In the first instance, it is important to distinguish between decolonial and post-colonial theory. Decolonial scholars depart from the idea that we are past or "post" colonisation, even with the formal end of empire and colonies. Instead, it argues that decolonisation was not achieved in these emancipated regions. In fact, decolonial theory argues it never could be, as decolonisation is not something that can be "achieved" as such. As the colonial matrix of power persists through its continued control of knowledge production, the process of decolonising must also be an ongoing, active process. Thus, decolonial theory aims to reveal and reject the Eurocentric episteme still engrained in society today, to explore traditions of knowledge production that sit outside of colonialist models and therefore have historically been and remain marginalised.

In his seminal text, *Colonialidad y Modernidad/Racionalidad*, Quijano (1992, p.14) outlines two important concepts: *colonialidad* (coloniality) and *modernidad* (modernity). These would come to form the basis for much of decolonial theory, as part of the modernity/coloniality

school with Mignolo and Lugones (Bhambra, 2014, p.115).⁴ He defines the ongoing damage caused by European domination as “coloniality”. This is not to be confused with colonialism, which is the practice of domination of certain countries over others through full or partial political control. Instead, coloniality recognises that whilst these explicit regimes may have ended, with many countries (in Latin America and Africa especially) gaining independence, colonialist thought still dominates and damages marginalised communities. As Quijano (1992, p.14) describes, the colonialist logic seeks to institutionally and systematically marginalise othered forms of knowledge found in cultures of the Global Majority. This can still be seen today through their exclusion in curriculums, canons, and concepts of knowledge.

This is made possible through the centring of European, Enlightenment epistemology. As Quijano (1992, p.13) outlines, Europe is assumed as the “universal cultural model”, to which the rest of the world should aspire to. Here, we see the importance of linking coloniality to the concept of “modernity”. Within the rhetoric of modernity, Europe is placed as the front and centre of the global stage. Modernity's narrative proposes that Europe has achieved progress in the search for knowledge that “other”, “non-western” regions have not; science, order, and reason are proposed integral values sought.⁵ As such, modernity and rationality are also connected. This concept of a modern Europe is intrinsically linked with the Eurocentric epistemology that favours rational thought, and the canons of positivist scientific thought accepted as universally, objectively “correct” in the westernized world. In positioning itself as dominant in this way, Europe (and other countries associated with the Global North like the United States, Australia and Canada) is able to maintain its global power, gained through its colonial history, and now its position within the Global North. It is able to reproduce systems of

⁴ For further reading, Bhambra (2014) provides a clear overview and succinct explanation of the modernity/coloniality school, as well as highlighting the distinctions between decolonial and postcolonial theory.

⁵ I use the word "other" and "non-western" here as it is assumed within the colonial logic and has been used as an adjective in the past, in which the "west" is assumed the norm, and anything that falls outside it is seen as "other". I do not wish to perpetuate such centring of the Global North, but do consider it important to recognise this is the way these communities have historically been treated. Thus, I will refer to such cultures as “Othered”, to recognise the influence this labelling has had, but not continue the use of "other" and "non-western" as commonplace descriptors. I also follow the convention within decolonial scholarship as to not to capitalise reference to the “west” or “western”.

control over peoples outside this assumed centre, as the control of the production of knowledge leads to control of other spheres, such as political, economic, and cultural power.

Within this context the need for decolonial theory is made apparent, to find ways to undo the ongoing damage caused by colonial thought and frameworks. Mignolo is another key thinker in the school, who elaborates on Quijano's concepts of modernity/coloniality in the context of "epistemic decolonization". That is, an active challenge to the hegemony of European Enlightenment episteme. In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Mignolo (2011) highlights the importance of delinking from this colonial matrix, in order to imagine distinct approaches and futures. As alluded to earlier, he proposes decolonisation not just as a scholarly project, but a combination of both theory and action, or "thinking and doing" (2011, p.54). He demonstrates this in practice in his later work with co-author Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, which employs theory-praxis and local real-life examples to illustrate decolonial ways of both thinking and living (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). This focus on how we might put decolonisation into practice is a common theme throughout decolonial literature. Where thinkers critique current frameworks, they also propose viable alternative visions that can be applied in practice. These visions vary widely, adopting the erased past and precolonial principles in order to imagine bold new creative futures.

As such, there is no consensus on one singular way to decolonise. Some would consider such a proposal only to replace one dominant narrative with another, following a western understanding of a singular, universal, objective truth. Instead, some scholars advocate for a pluriversal approach. Rolando Vasquez-Melken, professor and co-director of Utrecht's annual *María Lugones Decolonial Summer School* with Walter Mignolo, elaborates on pluriversalism in his interview with Alma Angélica Cortés Lezama for Mexican academic journal *Nierika* (Lezama, 2021, p.230-2). As he describes, this approach aims to "de-silence" alternative modes of knowledge, in contrast to the singularity of an Anglo-Eurocentric universal narrative (2021, p.230). He clarifies that this is different to a relativist approach, which is how European thought has responded in the past to departures away from universalisms.

Another important disruption to this idea of a singular dominant narrative comes from Lugones, another key scholar of the modernity/coloniality school. Her approach incorporated coloniality into her own work as a feminist scholar, and emphasised the need for an

intersectional approach in decolonial theory, through the lenses of race, gender and sexuality (Bhabra, 2014, p.118). In the past, colonization disrupted precolonial societies' attitudes towards gender relations and organisation. Thus, in the present day, it follows that coloniality will perpetuate European understandings of categories and binaries of sex, gender and sexuality. However, as Bhabra (2014, p.118) identifies, she advocates for more than a "raced or gendered reading" of past histories, or objects, which may have been attempted in the past. Whilst such a methodology will not be applied here, it is important to consider and note that this approach merits specific focus in further research. Still, both scholars, through highlighting pluriversalism and intersectionality, illustrate decoloniality's embrace of multivocality. What is more, they both appear critical of how previous attempts may have not gone far enough in their attempts to address such issues, such as relativism or raced readings, which still align with western epistemologies.

This research applies these concepts of decoloniality to the case study of museums. As outlined above, decolonial scholars have taken on the task of challenging institutions that demonstrate structural biases in their approach to knowledge making and keeping. The museum is such an institution, as it controls the knowledge it decides to keep (through collecting and archiving) and share (through exhibitions and engagement). Such decisions impact the care, interpretation, and accessibility of the objects which it keeps, and thus the institution has a large amount of influence over the control of communities' cultural heritage and histories. This thesis refers to three articles published online that cover the topic of decolonising museums to a profound depth. Chwatal (2018) considers the ethnographic museum, especially the example of the Weltmuseum Wien in Austria. Caro Cocotle (2019) critiques the concepts of "multiculturalisation" and "the South" in drives to decolonise. Villegas and Sissokho (2020) outline the performativity of decolonial efforts in cultural institutions. Whilst these key critical voices do not refer to the two museums this thesis centres on, this research draws on the wealth of ideas proposed by them and applies their critique of the museum as a conceptual entity in the grounded analysis of the specific examples of the British and Mexican museums.

The field of museum studies itself predates decolonial theory, as it emerged alongside the founding of early collecting institutions like cabinets of curiosities as early as the sixteenth century. The ideological capacity of the museum has been highlighted by academics within this

traditional museology. Bennett's (1995) text *The Birth of the Museum* is a particularly seminal text that demonstrates how the western museum, as a space born at the same time as modernity, may represent certain societal values, function as a method of citizen control, and reproduce the ideologies of the nation-state. This text does not claim to be a piece of decolonial literature, and thus arguably does not consider in enough detail the intricacies of the intersection of these concepts with colonialism. However, given that academic texts like these have been considered foundational in the field of museum studies, it is necessary to recognise their influence on the field and how they may be relevant in illustrating established European frameworks in museum theory and practice.

Whilst Bennett rightly demonstrates the influence of epistemologies surrounding objectivity, neutrality, and rationality in the museum, he does not fully draw out the damaging impact these concepts have on Othered peoples and cultures. Decolonial scholars more explicitly highlight how institutions perpetuate an Anglo-Eurocentric epistemology and, again, assumes Europe as the universal cultural model (Quijano, 1992, p.13). In this worldview, anything that falls outside of the modernity/coloniality model is rejected as incongruous, irrational, and is Othered and marginalised in the museum space. In one interview with journalist Veka Duncan (2021) in Mexican magazine *Nexos*, Mignolo and fellow scholar Francisco Carballo succinctly describe how this development of western museology has impacted Latin American, and especially Mexican, museums. Whilst a comparatively brief text due to its readership outside of academia, Mignolo and Carballo reveal the influence of Anglo European ideology in the ties between museums, modernity and the nation-state, and then question how we may challenge these ideological influences in order to decolonise these institutions.

As aforementioned, in decolonial theory there is no consensus on a singular way to decolonise, and undo this damage of coloniality in the present day. Similarly, considering how to decolonise the museum is where thinkers diverge. This debate extends beyond Latin America, with significant momentum in regions affected by colonial histories, like the United States, Canada and Australia. As well as scholarly analysis, there has also been a strong grassroots activist movement across various countries calling to decolonise the museum. Blogs and social media channels of museum workers and activists, like that of Dr. Porchia Moore or Nathan muddyi Sentance, may be considered grey literature in academia, but they offer important and

contemporary insights to museum practice. Furthermore, as Black and First Nations writers, they are voices often unheard in traditional publishing, who may be quicker to respond to changes in the field than peer-reviewed scholarship, such as questioning shifts like those towards “diverse” hiring practices or the extent of official responses to social movements (Moore, 2020; Sentance, 2019). This scepticism is echoed by many decolonial thinkers, as many see previous efforts made by museums as too shallow. They argue the institutions are not interested in a genuine, foundational restructuring, which leads some to argue that it is not even possible for museums to decolonise at all.

This sense of frustration and disillusion with current efforts in museums has sparked protest and resistance. Some direct their expressions of discontent at the sector more generally, through campaigns like the aforementioned “#MuseumsAreNotNeutral” social media drive by Autry and Murawski (Autry, 2017). Other dissenting voices criticise individual institutions. The British Museum is a particularly contentious example, especially on issues of repatriation and restitution. The institution has faced criticism for its unwillingness to return artefacts of dubious provenance from its collection back to the source communities from which they came. For example, their ownership of Elgin Marbles or the Benin Bronzes have been particularly topical, as the subject of a stream of news articles in the UK press and best-selling books.⁶ Repeated calls from other nations for the Museum to return objects seen as “stolen” are embedded in the common cultural consciousness, as demonstrated by its frequent use as the punchline in online memes, satirical comics, and even late-night comedy sketches:

“Honestly, if you’re ever looking for a missing artifact? Nine times out of ten it’s in the British Museum. It’s basically the world’s largest ‘lost & found’, with both ‘lost’ and ‘found’ in the heaviest possible quotation marks”

(Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, 2022)

The sector has responded to this current wave of criticism. Arrieta, Roigé and Geert (2016, p.348) identify four major strategies, or *perspectivas* (perspectives), that museums have adopted in an attempt to innovate: *estética* (aesthetic); *crítica* (critical); *multicultural*

⁶ For example, The Benin Bronzes have recently the subject of two well-received books: see Hicks (2020); Phillips (2021).

(multicultural), and *autóctona* (Indigenous). Through differing techniques, the common aim is to follow current trends towards a more socially responsible museology, and remain relevant as institutions. In the past half-century, these changes have often focused on reflecting ideas of representation and celebration of diversity, that are commonly held as values of a world that is recognised as increasingly globalised and “multicultural”. In the past decade, there has been more focus on a critical perspective: not just incorporating positive representation of Othered cultures and peoples into institutions, but becoming self-aware through adopting an explicitly self-critical, and sometimes decolonial, lens. Muñiz Reed (2016, p.15) deems this incorporation of decolonial approaches the *giro decolonial*, or the “decolonial turn”. This trend sees exhibitions (usually temporary) that purport to reimagine or reinvent museum practice, or challenge colonialist standards and assumptions in their content and curation. In the UK, the first professional membership organization Museums Association (2021) has even released guidelines on how institutions can do so, through publication of their “decolonising principles”. Ariese and Wróblewska (2022) celebrate various examples of the adoption of decolonial ideas into museum practice in their recent survey book, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*. Whilst more commonplace and increasingly celebrated in the sector, scepticism does persist about the depth of this engagement between museums and decoloniality.

Much of the engagement analysed in academic literature has centred on the efforts made by high-profile Anglo European institutions: The Smithsonian, the Weltmuseum, The British Museum. There has been some, but comparatively little, exploration into Mexican museums of a similar national importance. Of particular relevance, I would highlight *Museum Matters*, a recent book by Achim, Deans-Smith and Rozenhal (2021) that aims to “historicize and complicate” the Mexican national museum complex. The authors and editors achieve this through an object-centred approach. They discuss a selection of objects from the permanent collections to illustrate contentious themes and spark further conversation, rather than act as a survey of the entire institution; a process that would be arduous and likely unachievable. It is interesting to note a similar methodology has also been recently been employed by creative writing authors to explore the British Museum’s Latin American collections, *Untold Microcosms*, led by their own Santo Domingo Centre for Excellence in Latin American Research (SDCELAR) and the Hay Festival

(Hughes and Orloff, 2022). However, on the whole, there is not a wealth of academic scholarship analysing Mexican museological trends, above all from a decolonial perspective.

In fact, as Brulon-Soares and Leshchenko (2018, p.74) highlight, Latin American literature generally has been underrepresented and marginalised in the field of museum theory, as it develops somewhat separately from the two “power centres” of knowledge production in the field: Anglophone and Francophone. Yet, museum theory and practice in Latin America in fact demonstrates its own unique characteristics for analysis. For example, *los museos comunitarios* are a trend born in Oaxaca, Mexico that differs from traditional museology, as community-led spaces which protect collective cultural heritage, generate culture and strengthen local identity. As Prados Torreira (2021, p.577) outlines in their recent feminist study of the Oaxacan model, this style of museum has been adopted in some neighbouring countries, and was heavily influenced by the 1972 Santiago Roundtable and ecomuseum movement of that decade. However, despite this New Museology movement gaining traction and international attention from scholars, there are few similar organisations to be found outside of Latin America. Yet, their importance is cited by decolonial scholars, like Mignolo, who proposes ecomuseums as a possible alternative for a decolonial museology in his article for *Nexos* (Duncan, 2021).

Whilst there is no lack of publications about the British Museum, fewer offer a critical perspective from the decolonial perspective, besides some self-congratulatory releases such as Giblin, Ramos and Grout (2019) writing as curators about achievements the institution has made in this context. Yet, amidst this, Room 27 proves itself to be a novel focus, as little existing scholarship of any kind can be found on this gallery. In using decolonial comparative analysis, this research intends to interrupt existing scholarship, as well as contribute to a gap in the literature, both on the example of the Mexico Gallery and the general underrepresentation of Latin America in the Anglo European museum and its surrounding literature. Comparatively, more scholarship exists on the permanent displays of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, but it is hoped that through the novel juxtaposition of these two examples, this project will reveal new findings about colonialist tendencies in national museums. Furthermore, it will introduce a new framework for understanding into the literature, in order to outline the potential applications of the conclusions of this analysis and encourage further research within the field.

1. The British Museum

Founded in 1753, the British Museum describes itself as "a museum of the world, for the world". It is a public museum dedicated to the display of human history, art and culture from across the world, spanning Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. The significant collection of global artefacts, spanning two million years, is shared through a display of 72 rooms, or exhibition galleries, open to the public and welcoming six million visitors annually to its site in London, England. Within its holdings, the Museum holds a large collection of around 90,000 contemporary, historical and archaeological objects from the Americas. Relatively little scholarship exists on the provenance of much of this collection; improved documentation and provenance research are outlined as goals of the Americas department (British Museum, 2023b). Their work covers the entire continent of North, Central and South America. Amidst this, this first chapter aims to outline and evaluate the British Museum's current approach to exhibiting their collections of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico, through their presentation in the gallery solely dedicated to their display: Room 27, or the Mexico Gallery.

This permanent gallery space was the result of a visit by then-President of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, to the British Museum in 1992. As the LA Times reported a year before its inauguration, the president was shocked to visit and find that despite its extensive collection – described as “arguably among the most important [...] outside Mexico” - the Museum had no Mexican objects exhibited, nor had ever placed more than a few on permanent display (Kaye, 1993). Thus, Salinas procured \$1.5 million from figures in the Mexican private sector, and donated it to the British Museum to construct a permanent exhibition space to showcase Mexican cultural heritage. The design of Mexico Gallery, in Room 27, was led by leading Mexican architect Teodoro Gonzalez de Leon, to contain display cases that could hold as many as 500 objects. All items chosen for display are from the Prehispanic period, prior to the arrival of Spanish colonising forces. It opened to public audiences in 1994.

The Gallery remains largely unchanged since its inauguration nearly thirty years ago. Self-described highlights include: large freestanding sculptures, like the Huastec Goddess sculpture (Am,+7001) (fig. 1); smaller ornate objects set in dark glass display cases, like the

double-headed serpent mosaic pectoral (Am1894,-.634) (fig. 2); a series of lintels from Yaxchilán (Am1923,Maud.4) (fig. 3).

It merits outlining here that the decision to exclusively display items from the Prehispanic era does not reflect restrictions of the collection. The British Museum does hold a range of items associated with the place of 'Mexico' from the centuries after invasion by Spanish colonial forces in 1492. Relative to what is on display, a quick search of their online catalogue demonstrates a range of contemporary examples of folk art: toys and figurines from the 1960s, altars from the 1970s, papercuts or 'papel picado' from the 1980s and 90s. Most recently, you can find an acquisition of a 'lucha libre' styled facemask online, made during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (British Museum, 2021,2006.1). These are all emblematic examples of more recent, and even contemporaneous, cultural production from Mexico.

On the opening of the Mexico Gallery, the LA Times reported that there were an unknown amount of items in the collections, although estimated in the thousands, "with about 1,000 objects said to be of exhibition quality" (Kaye, 1993). A search on the British Museum's online catalogue today reveals 16,507 results associated with the place of "Mexico" (BM online catalogue, 2024).

This large collection has been amassed over centuries through purchase, donation and field collection. Speaking on one item on display in Room 27, the Museum's website describes that "like many objects in the British Museum and the Mexico Gallery, the codex was not archaeologically excavated, but instead was purchased" (BM Mexico Gallery?).

Indeed, a significant proportion of the collections were acquired through purchase or donation. Yet other foundational parts of the collection demonstrate more explicitly the direct interference Britain, and the British Museum itself, carried out in the region and its landscape of cultural heritage. In this way, it appears that the Museum tries to distance the provenance history of the collection with imperial activities of violent removal and looting of the Americas by colonial forces elsewhere in Europe, and obfuscate their own role in the purchase or excavation of items removed from Latin America.

A collaborative project between the British Museum and Google Arts and Culture reveals the history of the Maya artefacts in the collection specifically. They note a lack of interest in the Ancient Maya until the work of Alfred Percival Maudslay in the 1880's, whose field collection and excavation primarily in Yaxchilán, Mexico, and Cópán, Honduras, removed a wealth of original monuments and architectural pieces from their contexts and into the V&A's holdings, before being donated to the British Museum in the 1920s. Most significantly amongst these are the Yaxchilán lintels, original sculptures which the Museum describes as "among the most well-known objects in the British Museum's entire collection" (Google Arts and Culture, 2024).

Maudsley's work sparked interest amongst contemporaries who built private collections, like the German collector Charles Fenton or Thomas Gann, district medical officer for British Honduras, (now Belize) from 1894-1923 whose collection largely comprised of items he had excavated from sites in Central America firsthand. These private collections were later acquired by the British Museum.

The British Museum also played a direct role in removal of objects from these regions in Central America. Whilst the project does not detail sites in Mexico, it does detail a series of expeditions to nearby sites led by Thomas Athol Joyce in 1926, 1927, 1930 and 1931. Joyce was then Head, or 'Keeper' of Ethnography at the British Museum. They undertook excavations in British Honduras – at that time, a British Crown colony. The [website] details how a number of objects, like large stone stelae, were transported to the British Museum.

These trips also inspired other museums in the Global North to lead similar excavations in the region, like the US-led Marshall Field Archaeological Expeditions, from Chicago to British Honduras and Guatemala. Excavated materials from these expeditions are now held in the British Museum's collections.

These histories indicate that the Museum has not been entirely transparent about its own role in its impact in the region. At least, the provenance of its collection of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico and Central America is not offered to its audiences upfront, nor in great depth. Much of the rest of the Mexican, and indeed the wider Americas collection, has little provenance information given that it has suffered from a lack of thorough research. Yet made clear from what is known is that the collecting activity of the British Museum had a direct impact on the

region's cultural landscape, through the excavation of materials from sites across Central America, the encouragement of further removal of items, and driving the market for Mexican antiquities through their purchase.

Now, the Museum states that their priorities have moved away from excavation and active collecting, towards increasing access to the existing collections through digitisation and outreach. For millions of members of the public each year, the primary point of access will be the Mexico Gallery, the only room dedicated to the display of items from this region in the British Museum's free, public, physical site in London.

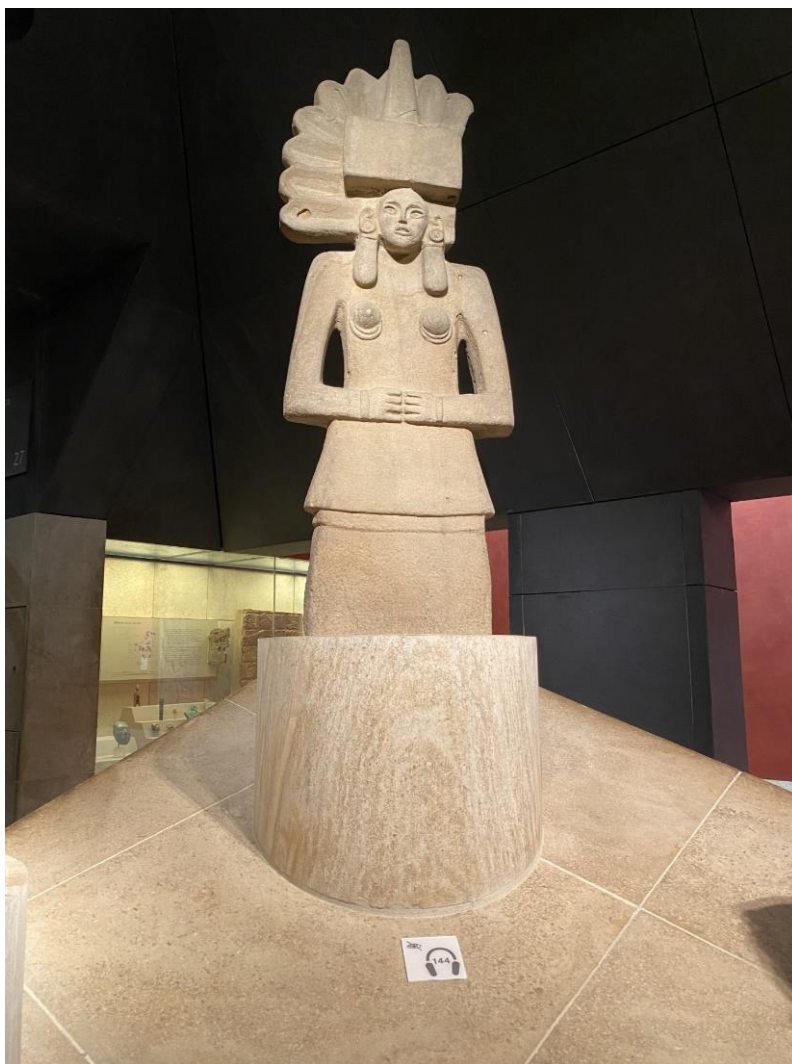


Figure 1: Huastec Goddess sculpture (Am,+7001), Room 27.

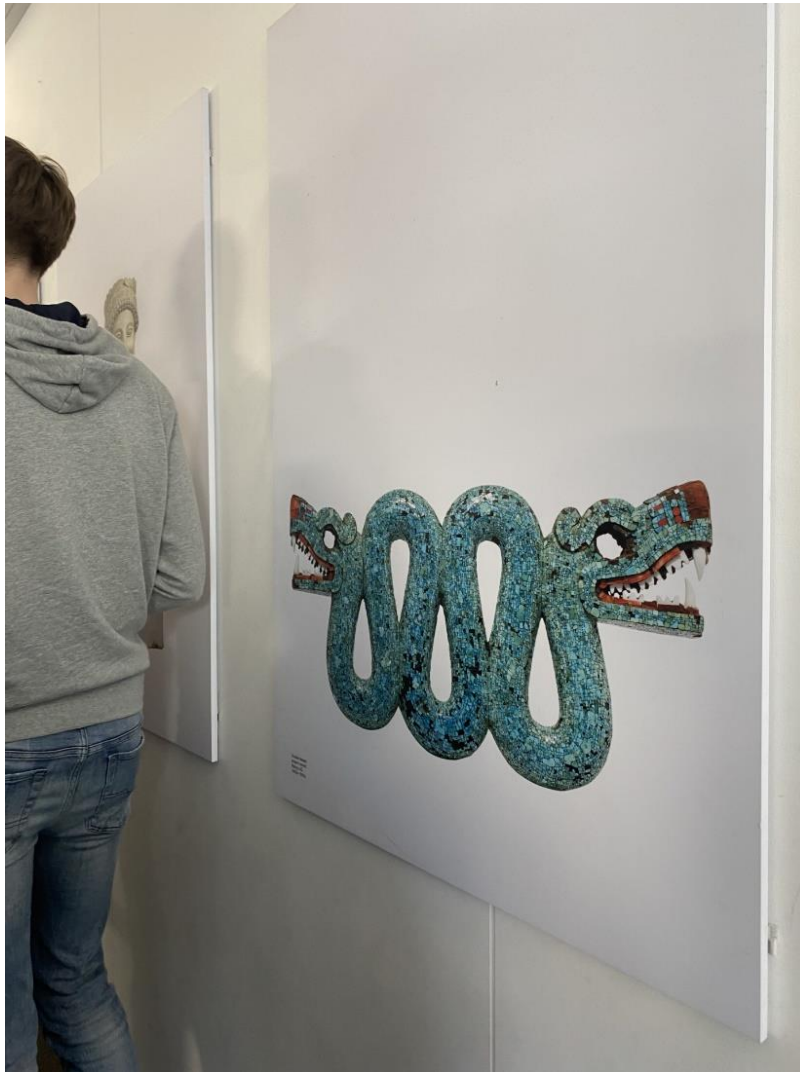


Figure 2: Promotional image of double-headed serpent mosaic pectoral (Am1894,-.634).

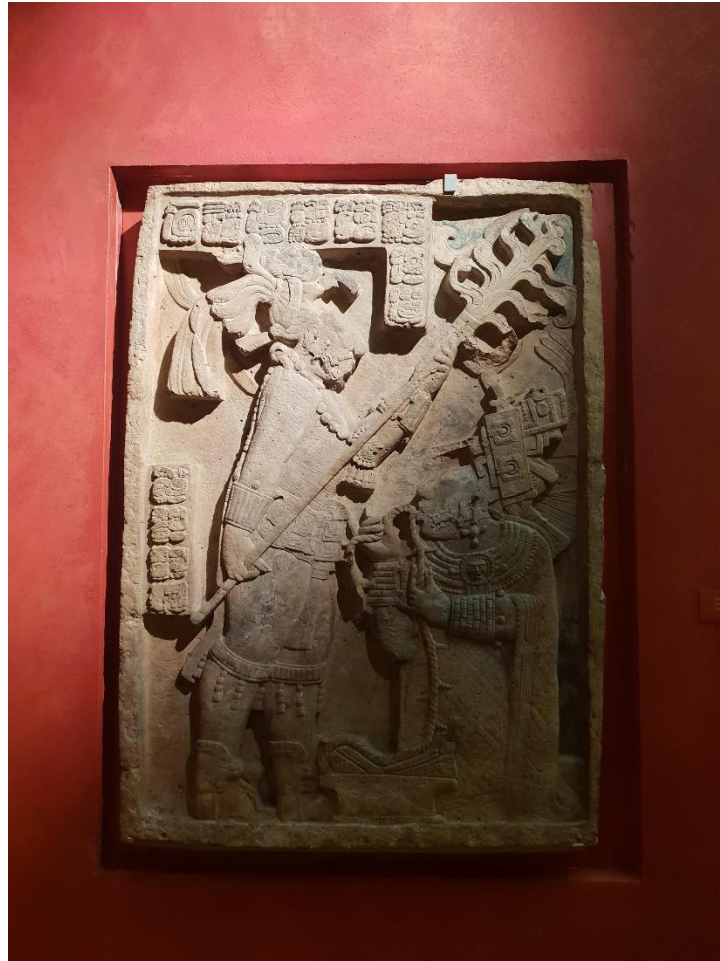


Figure 3: Lintel 24 (Am1923,Maud.4), Room 27.

Caro Cocotle (2019) argues that museums as modern institutions are not just founded in the colonial logic, but actively seek to reinforce these colonial power structures which herald Eurocentric thought and detract from the importance of non-European knowledge and cultures. This chapter will argue that the British Museum is influenced by its historical ties to colonialism to continue to perpetuate a colonialist institutional epistemology today. This impacts the curation and interpretation of the Mexico Gallery, which presents limited and harmful representations of Indigeneity, and limits access for these source communities to connect with their own cultural heritage. Outlining these colonialist ideologies in the Anglo European state museum will then aid analysis of Mexican museology in the chapter that follows.

First, it is necessary to outline the epistemological foundations of the Museum, and its connections to imperial and Eurocentric loyalties. Then, the chapter will identify specific ways in

which these colonial biases present themselves in the Mexico Gallery exhibition, through its curation and interpretation. It will also explore how audiences engage with the permanent exhibition on display, and their experiences. Finally, the chapter will delve into potential futures for the British Museum, offering key points for consideration faced with proposed changes to Room 27 in future projects.

This chapter uses primary data collected for this research project. Namely, data collected through visitor surveys in the Mexico Gallery, and interviews with members of staff from the Interpretation and Visitor Services departments, as well as previous collaborators Ian and Graciela of Mexicolore, and independent researcher Daniel Salinas Córdova. Survey data collected for this project presented in this chapter combines coded statistical analysis with qualitative quotes from respondents, who are identified by their numerical marker.

Historical foundations and functions

To begin, this chapter will interrogate the wider history of the British Museum, in order to situate the Mexico Gallery amongst the wider epistemological foundations of the institution within which it is found. This section will illustrate the British Museum's ties to colonial histories in its conception, and the subsequent influence on its institutional values, narratives and positionality, which in turn impact its assumed function of educating the public.

The British Museum finds itself intrinsically linked to the legacies of empire and colonial rule, as it owes its inauguration in 1753 to a donation by Sir Hans Sloane, a wealthy benefactor whose income was “partly derived from enslaved labour on Jamaican sugar plantations” (British Museum, 2022). Whilst some considered his views progressive for the era, its founder demonstrates how the Museum's history is inextricably linked to colonial histories as its foundational collections were amassed by a white male collector who materially benefitted from the subjugation of marginalised peoples, owing to his own position of privilege and power.

These historical beginnings leads us to question the values upon which the Museum was founded. Conceived within the context of imperial rule, the European ethnographic museum departs from earlier, exoticising cabinets of curiosities to employ Enlightenment frameworks of “science” and “reason”. They did so through classifying and ordering collections to align with

ideals of modernity including reason and rationality. As Bennett (1995, p.2) describes, museums' journey from chaos to order simultaneously mirrored science's progress from error to truth. In this way, the British Museum parallels the positionality taken by similar major European museums, who began to self-identify as scientific institutions: that is, as it aligns with western understandings of this term, which primarily value an objective and positivist approach. It follows that the western museum must then present itself as "neutral" and free of any bias that would affect its reliability. This is demonstrated in the British Museum's "traditional, conservative approach" to interpretation, as it has historically utilised a "neutral institutional voice" in its object labels (Frost, 2019, p.498). The use of an unaffected tone does not allow for any emotion or subjectivity in its outputs, from research to display. Instead, it presents information as factually "correct" (i.e. in line with European Enlightenment thought), demonstrating the institution's fidelity to positivist values.

However, in doing so, decolonial scholars highlight how this thereby silences any alternative worldviews and rejects them as irrational, incongruous, and implicitly, irrelevant. For example, in a positivist worldview, the concept of "care" of cultural objects refers more to upholding adherence to standards of scientific conservation or collection management (e.g. the Spectrum standard required for accreditation in the UK). At the British Museum, the "Collection Care" department is comprised of three teams: Collection Management, Conservation, and Photography and Imaging, which "ensure best practice is maintained" while handling, preserving and digitising the objects (British Museum, 2024a). However, it might be considered that this view of collections care is narrow, and that other understandings of "care", particularly those specific to source communities, are disregarded. For example, one recent demand for repatriation comes from the Indigenous people of Rapa Nui (or Easter Island) for the "Hoa Hakananai'a" moai statue held at the British Museum. As Carlos Edmunds, President of the Council of Elders describes to the Guardian, "It embodies the spirit of an ancestor, almost like a grandfather. This is what we want returned to our island – not just a statue" (Bartlett, 2019). Jessica Palalagi is an advocate for Pacific Island arts and heritage who traces her own ancestry to Niue and Scotland. Speaking at the most recent Museums Association conference, she highlights her experience of feeling like Pacific objects were uncared for within collections, as items were stripped of their connection to the Earth, nature and environment. These tenets are fundamental to her own

Indigenous worldview in which the Pacific Ocean is central, and acts as a connector to her ancestors. On seeing a similar statue, she asks the stone:

“When was the last time you felt the sun on your face?” (Palalagi, 2022).

The Museum ignores alternative methodologies of care of such items, which may value use or connection with objects more, instead focusing on maintenance of “best practice” using “professional knowledge and expertise” (British Museum, 2023c; British Museum, 2023d). Both phrases refer to a western conceptualisation of museum standards which is then adopted as the universal norm. In their interview with Duncan (2010), Mignolo and Carballo highlight how international regulatory standards of collections care, such as those outlined by ICOM, are often referred to as “universal”, but were in fact developed, determined and enforced by Eurocentric bodies. With this centring of the values of rationality, positivism, and “progress”, the Museum contributes to the continued influence of colonialist thought, privileging European thought and negating the importance of alternative knowledge systems. In opposition to its supposed “neutrality” in its interpretation, it is demonstrated to place positivist values over non-Eurocentric understandings of cultural heritage and its care.

These values inevitably influence the Museum’s interpretation, and lead to hegemonic narratives of colonialism in its curation. Such narratives are presented to the public through exhibitions which perpetuate colonialist frameworks of thinking. Particularly, binary frameworks that distance Europe from Othered, non-western cultures. Whilst the British Museum (2023b) does intend to represent “cultures across the globe”, rather than British history, the way in which it does so in fact ends up bolstering a British, and Anglo European identity. Where Europe is presented as “modern”, the non-west is juxtaposed as “primitive”, with the intention of exaggerating Europe’s own self-defined “progress”. In her recent PhD thesis, Carol Ann Dixon (2016) evidences this tendency to juxtapose through binary frameworks with the example of African cultural heritage in both the British Museum and other western museum practices. She employs a decolonial analysis to describe the “othering” of Africa through its placement in contrast to Europe. Through this, she evidences how this impulse to compare, juxtapose and “other” is traced in the British Museum from its inception with Sloane’s own *Miscellanies* catalogue to contemporary strategic plans of the institution’s board of directors and Trustees (2016, p.82). The British Museum further reaffirms this Othering by privileging Eurocentric

narratives with an overrepresentation of the Greco-Roman cultures, which will be explored later in this chapter. The “Other”, or non-western, is presented as oppositional to Eurocentric thought and values, thus encouraging simplified and stereotyped narratives of non-western cultures and peoples. Hence, whilst the British Museum may not explicitly centre its own nation in its displays, its approach still implicitly appeals to a Eurocentric framework, as it frames the Anglo-European as more valued than Othered cultures.

This employment of Eurocentric binaries in processes of Othering may also be considered a product of patriotism. The British Museum is a national project. As Head of Interpretation Stuart Frost identifies, "it is not a museum of British history, although inevitably... [it] reflects the long and complex history of the British Empire" (Frost, 2021, p.72). Indeed, in the primary data collected for this project, the influence of the institutional ties to colonial histories is clear in the public perception and visitor experience. When questioned about the function of the British Museum, 14% mentioned Britain's connections to Empire, with 5 respondents explicitly stating its purpose is still to continue to demonstrate Britain's imperial power. Whilst to some extent, these colonialist binaries are not made explicit in the displays, it is clear they still impact the narratives that the Museum presents about cultures outside of Europe, and lead to Eurocentric biases in the institutional interpretation.

This Anglo-Eurocentric bias is also demonstrated through the British Museum's own positioning of itself in relation to cultures, and other museums, across the world. As aforementioned, the British Museum defines itself as a “museum of the world for the world”. However, it is worth asking how the Museum came to adopt this role of global representative: both in practical terms, physically convening a wealth of global cultural heritage in one location, and theoretically, as an authoritative body to assume responsibility for the world's heritage. One thought-provoking response by a respondent who identified as Latino reflected on this concept:

“I find it curious and shocking how so many important cultural items from around the world came to be here. It is a constant reminder of colonisation. [...] I'd like to learn some more about Britain's relationship with Mexico, and how some of the pieces came to be here. **It somewhat says that Britain sees itself as the centre of the world**”

(Respondent 42)

Indeed, scholars have highlighted similar themes. Chwatal (2018) highlights how centralisation of collections was a technique used by “dwindling empires” as an assertion of power, through an attempt to gain control over the objects’ narrative and interpretation. This is important amidst consideration of Britain’s transition from imperialist to international geopolitical relations. Furthermore, the physical centralisation of the site can be considered to demonstrate the nation’s, and therefore Empire’s, importance. This parallels similar national museums in Europe, which also chose capital cities as their base, as an exemplary backdrop of modern, industrialised, and therefore “civilised” society. As Duncan and Wallach (1980, p.452) describe in their analysis of large European survey museums, they were intended as “indispensable ornaments of any great city, and even smaller cities with claims to civic and cultural importance must have their own versions”. This is still implied by their location in London, the large capital city, today. Carballo describes how physically, museums are used as essential infrastructure for “proof of achieving modernity” in a city (in Duncan, 2021). Intangibly, its theoretical positionality also intends to reflect its centring of itself as a global authoritative force. The Museum is illustrative of unequal power dynamics across the global, particularly between the Global North and South, in which Anglo-European nations like Britain assume themselves as the norm, as marked examples of the posited achievements of modernity, to which the “non-west” ought to aspire to.

For example, as aforementioned, international regulatory standards are often used to ensure European frameworks of collections care are used worldwide, as highlighted by Mignolo and Carballo (in Duncan, 2021). Brulon Soares (2019, p.5) similarly recognises the geopolitical influences behind the definition of seemingly “universal” museum values. Often, these frameworks are used to provide justification for the hoarding of global cultural heritage in the Global North. Through such standards, Anglo European institutions can disregard other institutional processes as unacceptable and imply that objects are safer held in their collections. Often, this is coupled with the paternalistic cop-out that Othered regions are not “able” to look after their own cultural heritage. This argument has resurfaced after the recent reporting of thefts from the British Museum. Representatives from Greece and Nigeria have renewed demands for repatriation of the contested Parthenon Marbles and Benin Bronzes. In media reports, they highlight the hypocrisy of being told items “would not be secure” in the countries from which they came, as both non-British nations “would either not be able to take care of them or they are

likely to be stolen”, when that has been the fate of as many as 2000 items in the Museum’s care (Chowdhury, 2023; Batty and Brown, 2023). Dan Hicks is the author of a recent book on the Benin Bronzes controversy, and identifies in the same article how the recent news illustrates the Museum’s “imperialist” stance of being the custodian of the world’s heritage (Batty and Brown, 2023). Indeed, the British Museum centres itself and Eurocentric thought by assuming an authoritative role in taking responsibility for cultural heritage from across the globe. Thereby, its self-positioning, and sense of entitlement to hold vital examples of global heritage, reproduces colonialist relationships with other countries and cultures, as it proposes itself as the correct, universal norm and rejects anything that falls outside of this nexus of European standards of museology. It merits consideration how this may complicate relationships and create a power dynamic with other cultures; many of whom form the source communities whose cultural heritage is then put on display in the Museum itself.

The Museum’s colonial history and its subsequent impact on colonialist values, narratives and biases is of particular concern when considering the presumed primary function of the British Museum, as a didactic institution. When questioned, 43% of survey respondents replied that the function, or purpose, of the British Museum was “to educate”. Allusions to education were the most common response to this question of the survey. Indeed, the Museum presents itself as a source of information to its audiences. Its position as a supplementary tool to a lack of formal education on non-European cultures is highlighted as important by visitors. For example, whilst the Aztecs and Maya have formed optional topics on the National Curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2 (in various forms through revisions since its introduction in 2000) (UK Parliament, 2009), respondents demonstrated surprise at how little they knew about the cultures on display, with a desire to learn more than they had been taught in schools. In this sense, the Museum holds a level of responsibility as a pedagogical institution. As Respondent 63 outlines, “it will be the only exposure most (?) will ever get on these cultures”.

This is supported by Graciela, a Mexican interviewee for this project, who highlighted her experiences of stereotypes and prejudices having lived in the United Kingdom since the 1980s. For her, this is owing to a lack of representation, beyond stereotypes of Mexican culture: from the “Bandit” chocolate advert in the 1980s, to a polemical Bake Off episode in 2022, she argues that the British media has “a lot to answer for” (Mursell and Sánchez, 2023). In this

context, the British Museum holds a key role as a public pedagogical tool, as the public (an average of six million visitors annually) will use it as foundationally educational given the lack of access to faithful representations of worldwide cultures elsewhere in the UK. Indeed, as Frost (2019, p.497) finds, ninety per cent of people trust the Museum to provide honest and genuine information. This trust in scholarship extends to contribute to further educational endeavours outside of the Museum walls: two respondents identify themselves as teachers, and two as students, each going on to use the Museum's resources for their own studies and teaching. In this way, the British Museum proves to be a centre of knowledge production. Hence, it warrants consideration who the Museum's values, positionality and faith to colonialist logics in turn influence the knowledge they produce and disseminate to the public.

In line with Bennet's (1995, p.8) findings in his seminal text *The Birth of the Museum*, in which he outlines how European museums have historically functioned as methods of state control of its citizens, a decolonial analysis can interrogate how the Museum acts as a method of control of knowledge. For Vázquez Melken, present museology encourages the public to consume and learn only the dominant vision (Lezama, 2021, p.238). That is, a singular Eurocentric canon. In the case of the British Museum, the use of the museum as a pedagogical tool is of benefit to both the European colonialist logic, and the British state. Dissemination of narratives that demonstrate a bias against non-European cultures, by framing European values as the universal norm, are employed in order to bolster British identity above Othered cultures. Thus, it is clear that the British Museum's perceived function "to educate" puts it in a position of power to act as a tool for the dissemination of colonialist thought. Hence, it is necessary to analyse the manner in which such biases may present themselves in the Museum's representations of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico, and how this may hold power to influence public perception and reproduce colonialist ideologies in public audiences, and thus wider society.

Mexico Gallery: curation and interpretation

With context about the institution's epistemological foundations and frameworks, this chapter will now begin to analyse the British Museum's treatment of its Latin American

collections in more detail. Specifically, this section will consider the permanent displays of Central American cultural heritage from the Prehispanic era in Room 27, also commonly known as the Mexico Gallery. This will interrogate the extent to which Indigenous cultures from this region are represented in the Museum, as well as how these representations are presented through curation and interpretation in the exhibition space.



Figure 4: Introductory case and panel, Room 27.

As aforementioned, the initial goal of the project was to showcase Mexican cultural heritage, which previously had not had a permanent space dedicated to its display. Room 27 offers a definitive and delineated space for presentation of objects from the region, and thus supplies a means of increased representation of Indigenous communities of Mexico. However, in consideration of its relative size within the Museum, the region, or indeed the entire continent of Latin America, still suffers from underrepresentation. The area of the Gallery, including the footprint of display cases, is approximately 190m². As a percentage of the entire Museum floorplan of all permanent and temporary exhibition galleries, this equates to just 1% of the Museum that is open to the public (British Museum Information Governance, 2023). The

disparity between the amount of space given to the region compared to other cultures is recognised by visitors. When asked what struck them most about the Mexico Gallery, 14% quoted the relative size of the gallery. Amongst these responses, all mention surprise at how small it is, or desire for it to be larger.

At the time of the Gallery's announcement, connections were made in the press about how its illustrative nature of the "visibility problem" for world heritage, due to a "European perspective traditionally placed on world history" (Kaye, 1993). Writing for *The Independent*, archaeologist David Keys (1993) made explicit allusion to the "Eurocentric" museum bias the lack of Mexican heritage previously on display revealed, with preferential treatment for Greece and Rome leading to neglect of Africa and the Americas. He cites that until the time of writing in March 1993, only 12 of the Museum's 6000 Mexican and Central American items had been on display (Keys, 1993).

Whilst now the Mexico Gallery does offer an intervention to this, Greco-Roman cultures remain the most visible in the permanent displays, with 18 dedicated rooms (comparative to the two for the entirety of the Americas). Last year, research carried out for the recent *Untold Microcosms* book highlighted that whilst the Museum holds a large collection of around 62,000 Latin American objects, just 1% is on display to the public (Foyles, 2022). Indigenous Latin American cultures do still not hold a pronounced visibility in the permanent displays, and seemingly not for a lack of resources. Items are held in the collection, but do not appear on display. In an interview for this research with Stuart Frost (2023), Head of Interpretation at the British Museum, he did reveal that in the planned Rosetta Project masterplan, an overhaul of the permanent gallery spaces will attempt to "rebalance the displays", including increased representation of the Americas and Oceania. However, in the meantime, it is important to analyse how its current iteration will impact both visitors and the source communities on display. With less on display, visitors are limited in how much of the collection they can access and in turn learn about the cultures they represent.

Furthermore, whilst the exhibition covers an extensive region spanning most of Central America, the small size of the gallery risks conflating the distinct cultures due to the condensed nature of their presentation. Firstly, the title of "Mexico" adheres to modern borders, and ignores the fact that Mesoamerica and the cultures on display covered a region spanning not only what is

now known as Mexico, but surrounding Central American countries too. This nuance is lost in the current display. Additionally, the small size means the display lacks the space to offer interpretation that can explore cultural specificity. On the one hand, the curation of the gallery is organised geographically, and clearly outlines the different regional cultures that emerged in the Prehispanic era. For example, separate cases lead the visitor from the Olmec, then explore the Maya, and then end with the Aztec cultures. However, each culture is afforded little more than a case each, with one large interpretation panel, and limited object labels for around 20-30 smaller objects. For example, as shown in Figure 5, the entire Olmec culture is reduced to one section with eleven objects. To its left is the general introductory panel, and to the right the display moves on to the Classic period. This chronological design of the room encourages the audience to view each subsequent culture as a step along a timeline of implied progress and does not afford the depth in interpretation to consider the complexities of relationships within and between cultures. For example, overlapping timelines, cultural exchange, or regional specificities. This is further encouraged due to the limited space given to the Mexico Gallery. As a smaller gallery, visitors will be encouraged to spend less time in the room, and thus be more likely to conflate the cultures after a short visit, as their recollection reimagines only a small area. As displays of different regions are materially pushed close together, it is harder to explore the extent of their heterogeneity. This leads to a homogenisation of the many Indigenous communities of Mexico, and encourages the audience to consider Indigenous Mexico as one, homogenous group rather than a series of distinct cultures.



Figure 5: “Olmec” case, Room 27.

The Gallery is also limited not only by its size, but also its infrequent rotation. The objects on display in Room 27 have remained largely unchanged since its opening in 1993. In this way, the Museum adopts a stance of passivity. By not adopting a role of active engagement with these objects or the communities they come from, the Museum absolves itself of responsibility to commit to continually update the exhibition design. Staff at the British Museum highlight the logistical issues associated with this particular gallery. Whilst not involved in curation themselves, Frost (2023) outlined the challenges that the current curatorial team have inherited in an interview for this project. The design is described as “inflexible” and “rigid”, as to replace objects they need to be “like for like” to fit in the more non-traditional cases. A complete refurbishment would come at great cost, of time and resources. However, whilst it may be difficult to change the objects, the more easily updatable interpretative text also remains largely the same as it has been for two decades. Yet, curiously, it does not appear noticeably outdated. This is possible due to the approach outlined previously, with “a reliance on a relatively low word count and neutral institutional voice in order to interpret objects” (Frost, 2019, p.498).

Indeed, most of the object labels focus primarily on a formal analysis, describing first the materiality of the object, then the iconography, and then how it may relate to a Mesoamerican cosmological worldview. However, through this approach, they offer little to no reference to any of the surviving Indigenous groups in the same regions. In this way, the Museum’s passive position allows the institution to evade responsibility of tackling complex and contested topics, as a decolonial museology would argue it should. As Chwatal (2018) states, institutions must be “active agents in the rewriting of anthropological history, rather than remaining passive storage sites”. However, in the Mexico Gallery, it is clear that the unchanging curation and interpretation of the room will be unable to tie the cultural heritage on display to contemporary concepts of Indigeneity.



Figure 6: Stone figure of Xochipilli (Am1825,1210.5), Room 27.

The lack of reference to contemporary Indigenous communities is harmful, as the gallery in turn encourages historicisation of the source communities through its presentation of their cultural heritage. With no reference to contemporary Indigenous peoples, it follows that there is no recognition of the potential meanings, value, use or functions of analogous objects in the present. For example, one visitor surveyed who identified as Mexican living in the UK responded that they were struck most by “seeing the stone of Xochipilli as I used to worship them”. This demonstrates the contemporary use of such objects, still tied to surviving belief systems. Yet, this visitor felt “the cultures need better representation/justice”, and particularly with this object:

“Xochipilli needs more context. They were big advocates for freedom of choice and sex workers” (Respondent 5)

As Renteria (2018, p.3) identifies in their MA thesis, literature is lacking around the deity Xochipilli, beyond commonly cited introductions as the Nahua Flower Prince. However, like this respondent, many interpretations also cite their links to gender, sexuality and sex work. Murray (2015) notes that “Xochiquetzal was both male and female at the same time, and in her male aspect (called Xochipilli), s/he was worshipped as the deity of male homosexuality and male prostitution”. Such queer interpretations of Prehispanic worldviews are complex, as they are relatively recent to emerge, and sometimes contested.⁷ As opinions within Mexican and Indigenous communities themselves remain heterogenous, it is beyond the scope of this project to fully explore the complexities of the specific example given here. However, this does illustrate the potential such objects have to explore themes relevant to contemporary Indigeneity, Mexican identity and pertinent political themes: gender, sexuality, sex work. Furthermore, the capturing of discourse around such topics would aid a less homogenised view of Indigenous peoples, by recognising the diversity of thought found within Indigenous communities as individuals.

Unfortunately, the interpretation of the Xochipilli statue, similar to the other objects in Room 27, does not surpass the Prehispanic era. Thus, any understanding of its contemporary use

⁷ Queer possibilities of the Mesoamerican pantheon are starting to be explored by decolonial thinkers. In *Queer Ancient Ways: A Decolonial Exploration*, Xiang (2018) offers a rereading of two Nahua examples, deity Coatlicue and “earth monster” Tlaltecuhli, from a queer and gendered perspective.

or meanings is lost. Brulon Soares (2019, p.3) hints to this process of historical objectification in discussion of Latin American cultural heritage, critiquing the appropriation of non-European cultures as “museum objects”. Achim (2021, p.232) links this to the example of Indigenous Mexican cultural heritage in Tehuantepec, arguing that the movement of objects into museums historicises them through their transformation into “antiquities”. In this way, she argues they are “relegated to an ancient past”. In an interview for this project, Graciela of Mexicolore gave a personal example of this phenomenon with the metate stone, an object she had seen presented as a historical object in museums in the UK, but that her family had just used regularly through her childhood in Mexico (Mursell and Sánchez, 2023). The presentation of such objects as purely historical, with no attempt to link them to contemporary Indigenous experiences or surviving source communities, in turn encourages only a historicised understanding of Indigeneity which is stereotypical and harmful. By divorcing the cultural heritage on display from the descendents of the source communities they came from, the Mexico Gallery encourages an understanding of Indigeneity as “ancient”, appealing to exoticizing tendencies and stereotypes. Chwatal (2018) identifies how a teleological model of progress, favoured by European Enlightenment thought, might encourage a “primitive” view of non-western cultures. That is, placing Othered peoples, and their cultural productions, outside of the path of modern history, implying they can only be part of a “prehistory”.

The structural design of the room also encourages this reading, by employing various aesthetic decisions in order to evoke “ancient” monumental architecture (British Museum, 2023e): the use of stone in freestanding plinths, organic dark red painted walls, low lighting and a dark corbelled roof. In this way, the visitor is encouraged to feel as if they were physically stepping back in time. In this way, the curatorial approach might seem to parallel Adrienne Lalli Hillis’ (2022) “tomb raider” trope, as they enter a faux experiential reproduction of Mesoamerica, assuming a role similar to that of the eighteenth-century colonial explorer. In fact, the guide of the daily Mexico tour draws this connection for audiences explicitly, recommending a trip to the real monumental architecture of Yaxchilán, a lesser-visited Maya archaeological site in Chiapas where the tour guide says you can “feel like Indiana Jones” (British Museum, 2023f). Built to appeal to the colonialist imagination, this room evokes an exoticist conceptualisation of adventure and “discovery” of Othered, ancient cultures, always placed in the past - before

returning to the familiar comfort of the Enlightenment room next door. This evidences biases found in the Museum, particularly a Eurocentric bias to exclude non-western cultures from a canon of modernity. This results in stereotypes of Indigenous Mexican communities, as something exotic and historic rather than real, living, surviving peoples.



Figure 7: Room shot of Mexico Gallery.



Figure 8: View of corbelled roof.



Figure 9: Lintels displayed on red painted wall.



Figure 10: Freestanding sculptures on faux stone plinth.

Mexico Gallery: visitor engagement and experience

Having considered the way in which the British Museum displays cultural heritage in the Mexico Gallery, it is also important to analyse the reception of this room by audiences. This will primarily analyse the impact on accessibility for the Indigenous source communities whom the display intends to represent, but will also consider non-Indigenous audiences, who make up the majority of the visitor demographic.

One simple but overarching barrier to access for Indigenous audiences is the location. As alluded to earlier, in its epistemological foundations, the Museum assumes Britain "as the centre of the world" (Respondent 42). This leads to the expectation that visitors will travel to the Museum, affecting accessibility for international visitors based far from Britain or Europe.

Digitisation of museum collections has offered an alternative route to access to the Museum's collection for those based abroad; this will be investigated further in the third chapter of this thesis. However, to visit the physical site in London does present a very tangible barrier to visitor engagement. Concern about this was reflected in survey responses:

“Simply from observation today – lot of spanish speakers in the gallery. My concern is – do people need to travel to the UK to see their national/cultural treasures I.e. should they be re-homed back to Mexico/Central America” (Respondent 47)

“Interesting that so many Mexican artefacts are located in a British museum. Good and bad feelings, since they are well kept but far from origin” (Respondent 25)

In addition to this, one teacher from the US said that of her students (over 50% of Latin American heritage and many from Mexican immigrant families):

“most will never be able to afford to travel overseas and see this exhibit in their lifetime” (Respondent 1)

Whilst it is on free display for the public, to physically view the Gallery could require a lengthy and costly journey across the Atlantic to visit the Museum in-person. Whilst perhaps the most obvious barrier, the physical location of the Museum still warrants recognition in discussion of visitor engagement, particularly as it presents a tangible barrier between the cultural heritage on display in the Mexico Gallery and the source communities that they originate from. Rather than meet Indigenous peoples where they are, to access the Mexico Gallery visitors must travel to the UK to view their own cultural heritage on display.

The survey response above also highlights a second fundamental barrier to access – language. They mention anecdotally that they noticed a lot of Spanish speakers. In fact, multiple languages exist amongst non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities in Mexico. The most recent census identifies a high and increasing number of Mexicans who speak an Indigenous language: 6.1% of the population, or some 7.36 million people according to the most recent Census (INEGI, 2021). It also indicates that the majority of the population (93.8 percent) was monolingual in Spanish. The British Museum does not cater for either Spanish nor Indigenous languages. Instead, all interpretative text in the Gallery is presented in English. Admittedly, this is the primary language of the United Kingdom, and thus many of the Museum's home visitors.

Furthermore, it would be a large undertaking to translate interpretations into each Indigenous language spoken in Mexico (around 364 variants, according to IWGIA (2022)). However, this is highlighted as important to visitors surveyed. When asked about the responsibility the British Museum held in representing non-British cultures, one responded:

“offer free descriptions of the pieces with at least the current language of the people of that culture” (Respondent 39)

Multilingualism is also delineated as important for decolonial approaches to museology. Multiple languages would help disrupt the Anglophone power centre identified by Brulon Soares and Leshchenko (2018, pp.64-5). Even if the British Museum were to make its outputs at least bilingual, and offered translations/resources in Spanish, this would increase access for Mexican audiences, especially the overwhelming proportion of the population who identify as monolingual. Spanish is the third most spoken language worldwide, and as a hub for international tourism, translations could be warranted a priority for the visitor experience. If the British Museum continues to hold these items of important cultural heritage to such communities, they must also hold a responsibility to widen access, and the ability to access information in a native tongue encourages visitors to feel welcomed and represented by the institution. With increased digital efforts too, where the public (including Indigenous groups) are increasingly likely to encounter their collections or reproductions of the exhibition online, a re-evaluation of the role of language in its interpretation and visitor engagement strategies appears necessary.

A further limitation for source communities' engagement with objects on display is found in their limited use. That is, the guarding of the objects by the Museum to prohibit any interactivity with the cultural heritage items. As described earlier in this chapter, institutional policies are in place to align with international standards of collections "care", which limit the actual use of objects by communities, like the Rapa Nui people and the moai sculpture of their ancestor. In some way, the Mexico Gallery appears relatively open for visitors to interact with objects on display. Many works seem unguarded, with freestanding sculptures and lintels not surrounded by barriers or glass. Many visitors reflect their surprise at this in survey responses:

“Being able to get up close, no glass on the lintels, being able to see in more detail”
(Respondent 58)

“I was surprised by how close-up I was able to view the lintels and the details they contain” (Respondent 22)

However, despite a supposed interactivity, these objects are still subject to similar protective standards that adhere to Eurocentric standards of care and limit visitor interaction with items. To begin, most objects remain behind traditional glass cases, which line the room and separate the object from the audience entirely. Of the freestanding items, which appear unguarded, many are still protected by an electronic beam that sounds an alarm if crossed – a common noise to hear in the Mexico Gallery as visitors get too close.

Similar to the moai statue mentioned earlier, Indigenous communities may desire further forms of engagement with objects than is permitted by the museum. Research carried out by the Santo Domingo Centre, a sister institute of the British Museum which supports investigation into its Latin American collections, highlights culturally specific challenges to "traditional" procedures of object care identified through working with Upper Rio Negro Indigenous communities of Brazil. This project highlighted the conceptualisation of objects as living entities, and how being distant from their place of origin and unused for an extensive period of time had meant these objects had lost their role in Indigenous society, and therefore the objects' "*alma*", or "soul" (Martins, 2022, pp.239-40). Grum (2022, pp. 180-1) further explores these concepts, which suggest a more reciprocal relationship with cultural heritage items, in an artist residency working with SDCELAR and collections items historically used in Indigenous rituals on the island of Tierra del Fuego, situated between Chile and Argentina:

“I tried to think from the object’s perspective, what it would feel like to leave your native land, abandon your natural purpose, and, now, to find yourself wrapped in acid-free paper forever [...] I think about how many arrows have been shot or if the harpoon remembers the last fish which became nutrition thanks to it. I think about how it would feel to be here, if maybe they would prefer to be buried under some no-name hill in their native land”.

The personified description of cultural heritage found amongst in research across Indigenous and Latin American communities demonstrates the difference in how communities interact and engage with items, and thereby illustrates the need to reconceptualise the object-audience relationship in the Mexico display in order for source communities to be able to connect with the items.

Another angle of the reception of this display is the potential for emotional responses to objects on display, and how this may limit the accessibility of exhibitions. Of primary concern is the negative emotions that could arise for Indigenous visitors, caused by insensitive handling of sensitive topics. With the closest connection to the colonial histories on display, these audiences are more likely to have an emotional reaction to the histories represented. They could have personal connections to stories that serve as triggers for such responses, like family histories tied to specific conflicts in the past, or reminders of their own experiences of colonialist violence in the present. For example, Vera-Flores (2022), a researcher working with SDCELAR (an offshoot of the British Museum), describes an “emotional encounter” she experienced on viewing the Tepetlaoztoc Codex in their collection. Within this, she recognised and responded to the connections the item holds with “the ways that [Spanish] colonisers violently subjugated the Indigenous population” and “violence and crime committed against my ancestors, which continue to be felt... in Mexico”. Her account highlights a key theme often unaddressed in museums. As museums lean towards Eurocentric ideals of objectivity, there is a narrow expectation of how visitors might interact with the space. The exhibition is a space for “thinking”, not “feeling”. As such, it is unequipped to deal with “subjective” experiences, or the emotional repercussions of encounters with objects that contain complex, violent colonialist histories. This assumed norm of an unaffected, unbiased, intellectualised visitor experience makes such displays inaccessible for many Indigenous visitors, for whom such a reaction may be unavoidable – understandably, given their context.

Accommodations can be made for such experiences amongst Indigenous visitors. For example, McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan (2021, p.107) identify archival institutions that recognise the potential distress their holdings can cause, and recommend protocols to counteract and address this: staff training, signposting, increased diversity in hiring. Improving access for Indigenous visitors can be facilitated through simple procedural changes, such as providing

tissues if needed (2021, p.103). In essence, anything that supports visitors to feel the space is less cold, formal and quiet, and instead facilitate a space where they can openly respond to traumatic histories reflected in collections. This aligns with Vazquez Melken's description of a decolonial museology in his interview with Lezama (2021), as one that can aim to "heal the colonial wound".

Currently, this is not facilitated within the Mexico Gallery. There is an absence of mention of potentially triggering themes or material, both in-person and online, and no visible resources to guide visitors through their visit to the Gallery. This lack of resources implies that space is not afforded to recognise and process potentially upsetting or distressing emotional encounters. In fact, the Museum indicates that the treatment of contested and therefore potentially upsetting themes needs to be limited somewhat, as to not overwhelm the general audience base. For example, Frost (2023) highlights the need to balance such themes with more positive emotional interactions, like a sense of "fun" or use of the museum as an "escape" by audiences.⁸

However, it must be recognised that negative connotations are inescapable for marginalised groups. This is highlighted further by front-of-house staff member Elena (2023), who emphasises in an interview the fact that many staff members have no choice but to interact with the displays in the British Museum daily, as part of their job responsibilities, with no recognition of the emotional responses certain displays might stir. This front-facing workforce is also amongst the most diverse, and lowest-paid members of the institution's staffing structure. Elena (2023) gave a personal example of being directly affected by being affronted by sensitive themes in their role. Being of South Asian heritage, they find short, shallow, casual reference to famine and partition in India upsetting in other rooms at the Museum – yet these displays are unavoidable in their daily working arrangements. The assumption of an ability to remain emotionally unaffected in the museum is one that centres whiteness, and assumes a lack of the lived experience of colonialist violence to inform the experience of the exhibition, for both

⁸ It is important to mention that the visitor surveys highlighted that, in fact, non-Indigenous audiences did seem aware and affected by these contested histories too. This is demonstrated in responses to the Mexico Gallery, which reported emotions ranging on a scale of "discomfort" to "repulsiveness", including "unnerving", "disheartening" and "guilt".

visitors and staff. The British Museum offers no resources to visitors affected by their exhibitions, and as such invalidates their experiences and fails to recognise the importance of accommodating marginalised communities in the space.

Where the above analysis considers the source communities the Mexico Gallery seeks to represent, it is also necessary to consider the demographic that constitutes the majority of visitors to the Museum: non-Indigenous audiences, that will have no direct connection to the cultural heritage on display in Room 27. For such audiences, the visitor experience will differ, particularly as they visit the Mexico Gallery as just one part of the much larger Museum. As Stuart Frost (2019, p.493) demonstrates, “most visitors to the Museum’s free displays browse selectively [...] only staying in each room for between three to ten minutes”. One survey respondent, who identified as a white US citizen, described their personal reaction to this experience of the spaces:

“I felt guilt when looking at the artefacts. That these items, some religious and significant to families were just on display for tourists to quickly look at for a few seconds and then move on” (Respondent 1)

Here, it can be argued that the Museum holds responsibility for increasing the depth of engagement with these topics. As outlined earlier, its perceived primary function is education, and its use as a pedagogical tool by audiences provides a pertinent intervention to underrepresentation of Mexican culture. Multiple survey respondents demonstrated an eagerness to engage and learn more about the cultures on display, saying that their main takeaway from their visit to the Mexico Gallery was that they “must”/“need”/“want to” learn more about the culture and history of the country. In the suggestions section of the survey, multiple respondents requested “more about the history/culture/context of Mexico”. Another respondent from the US highlights how the Museum could provide this:

“I think the exhibit could give more cultural background. While the signage gives a good context on the objects themselves, I would have liked to see more info about the surrounding cultures and motivations for the creation of these objects” (Respondent 22)

This demonstrates that there is a clear interest amongst non-Indigenous audiences, even with no direct cultural connection to the heritage on display, to increase engagement with these topics - if

this information is made available to them by the Museum. This is evidenced further by the popularity of other additive options for visitors, like the insights tour of the gallery, offered daily, which suggests that audiences are willing to spend more time in this space. Elsewhere, the success of the Museum's wider "Collecting and Empire" object trail, for visitors to "learn how colonial relationships shaped the British Museum's collection", equally demonstrates audiences' interest in engaging with decolonial dialogue during their visit. At present, no objects from Mexico or on display in Room 27 feature on this trail (British Museum, 2023g), perhaps due to the lack of a direct relationship between the United Kingdom and Mexico as nations in their respective colonial pasts. However, to offer a more profound visitor experience and encourage more than surface-level engagement, curation of the Mexico Gallery itself would require more space to delve into the complex entanglements of colonialist histories, Indigenous cultures and contemporary communities. For example, the excavations by British individuals or expeditions led by the Museum found in the acquisition histories of items in the collection, as identified earlier in this chapter. As analysed above, this is not currently achieved with the size of the Gallery in its present iteration, which limits the number of objects, the length of labels and the depth of the interpretative text on display. However, in the long-term Rosetta Project refurbishment, or in shorter-term projects like interactive trails and tours, approaches should be considered that allow visitors to engage further with the cultural heritage on display, and the related topics about Mexican and Indigenous communities that it can unveil for audiences.

Futures of the Mexico Gallery

Given the context of the upcoming Rosetta Project refurbishment of the British Museum, it is necessary to address how the institution's upcoming masterplan might challenge the conclusions drawn in this chapter. Limited details have been released to the public, but from the evidence available there are some key factors to consider about how visitors, staff, source communities and decolonial thinkers will respond to proposed changes and potential futures of the British Museum.

In an interview for this project in April 2023, Frost reveals that the Rosetta redisplay is still in the early research, development and consultation stages, and will take at least 10 years to

come to completion. A more recent announcement from outgoing director Hartwig Fischer, alongside his resignation in August 2023, revealed some details of the masterplan timing, with the renovation work set to take “multiple decades” and the project to be “multigenerational” (Building Design, 2023). Further details are set to be published in Autumn 2023.

In announcements about the Rosetta Project, the Museum has emphasized a renewed commitment to “give more prominence to parts of the collection which are at present under-represented in the public spaces” (Museums Association, 2022). They also intend to change the way they work with the communities these collections represent. Outgoing chairman Richard Lambert (2021), in the Museum’s 2020-21 annual report, states that the project will “pioneer new ways of working in partnership with our networks, nationally and internationally”. This is reflected in a new curatorial post for the “Reimagining the British Museum” scheme, set to run until mid-2023, tasked with developing new permanent gallery spaces through pilots and evaluation of “different collaborative methods and narrative approaches” (Museums Association, 2022).

Whilst the results of this scheme are not yet made visible to audiences, it is clear that visitors are ready for such innovation. When asked about the responsibility the British Museum may hold in representing non-British cultures, 9% of survey respondents proposed the importance of inclusion of contemporary voices in the British Museum’s representations of non-British cultures. Responses stressed:

“Should work with the original culture to ensure respect” (Respondent 43, White British)

“It should [...] attempt to involve any contemporary peoples in the display of these items” (Respondent 56, White European)

“Responsibility to allow the voices of current peoples who claim the artifacts [sic] in order to represent their history properly” (Respondent 55, White)

“I think they should allow each nation [to] contribute and help curate what is the most factual information and what they allow to be displayed [...] I think having real narratives

from people directly from the region and culture would be a more beneficial and respectful way of learning” (Respondent 1, White US)

“Elevating their voices and offering platform” (Respondent 38, White US)

Such polyvocal curatorial techniques will be explored further in Chapter 3, but if the next Mexico gallery were to allow Indigenous communities the means to self-representation in exhibitions, it is clear it would be welcomed by audiences.

On the other hand, instances of collaborations can invite scepticism when carried out by institutions of similar size, standing, and positionality to the British Museum. On the Museum’s part, it tends to opt for collaborators seen as professional, diplomatic, sanitised voices, that will not largely contest or challenge the institution. Caro Cocotle (2019) recognises the trend of museums announcing collaborations with peripheric subjects, whilst the institutions remains largely unchallenged at a structural, or operational, level, limiting the impact the invited collaborator can make Chwatal (2018) echoes her argument, proposing that whilst institutions offer “radical rethinking”, institutions might use methods of collaboration with “critical voices” to reassure the public they are doing the work, regardless of whether there is any fundamental, institutional change. To consider the original Mexico Gallery collaboration through this lens, it is worth assessing the fact that the relationship was primarily between two parties: the British Museum and the government of Mexico. No attempt at a smaller-scale, grassroots consultation of Indigenous communities themselves was undertaken. In this way, the Mexico Gallery project reproduces patriotic and nationalist aims rather than peoples (as evidenced even in the name, which alludes to Mexico although the Mesoamerican culture crosses other modern national borders). As Daniel Salinas Córdova, an independent researcher, described in an interview for this research, the Mexico Gallery project aimed to “showcase a Prehispanic past to the same level as classical antiquity” (Salinas Córdova, 2023). It appeals to existing European frameworks of value, perpetuated by the British Museum. Thus, it is made clear that the label of collaborative curation is a nuanced term that ought not to be accepted at face value, as it may vary in its profundity of approach. In this instance, the displays of cultural heritage can be labelled as collaborative without engaging with Indigenous communities themselves.

Yet, if audiences accept that the Museum's work is as progressive as it is self-described by the institution, there is a potential value for the institution in engaging with efforts seen as "decolonising the museum". Survey responses reveal the damage caused by discourse surrounding repatriation and decolonising to the public perception of the Museum. 28% of respondents surveyed made explicit and unprompted reference to "theft", or items being "stolen".⁹ When asked what responsibility the Museum held in representing non-British cultures, 18% made implicit reference to suspicion around provenance of the survey suspicion around provenance/acquisition/ownership of artefacts (18%), with mention of repatriation, restitution and returning too (14%). Visible engagement by the Museum with these topics would repair this recent reputational damage and regain public trust. In turn, the Museum would be able to reassert itself as an authoritative voice, and attempt to retain agency and status as Villegas and Sissokho (2020) describe of similar trends across other museums. However, it is fundamental to ensure that this commitment goes beyond the use of buzzwords, and is evidenced by real action.

In considering decolonial praxis, and the actions the Museum will take within the Rosetta masterplan, it is also worth noting the implications of a large-scale project amidst a current cost-of-living crisis in the UK. The Rosetta masterplan is predicted to cost around one billion pounds, which will go towards essential repairs and the planned redisplay (Museums Association, 2022). This is a large investment for the organisation to make, especially amidst disputes with trade unions about working conditions and salaries for staff at the British Museum. The Museum has closed for industrial action at various points throughout 2023: "Walkout Wednesday" on the 1st February, 13th to 19th February, 6th to 12th April, and action planned but called off for 11th to 16th July. Those present at the PCS picket line in April described in informal interviews for this project feeling underpaid and undervalued as reasoning for going on strike. Speaker and PCS Culture Group Secretary Steven Warwick (2023) highlighted that pay at the Museum had fallen behind the real terms cost-of-living against the RPI rate of inflation. One anonymous interviewee reported that some positions were receiving pay below the minimum wage for London, and that some members of staff were using foodbanks. As alluded to earlier and is found in trends across institutions, the correlation between the lowest-paid and most marginalised members of staff

⁹ This fieldwork was carried out prior to the recent scandal of thefts from the British Museum, and is inferred to instead refer to perceived thefts by the British Museum from Othered cultures, through analysis of the comments in their original context.

must also be recognised, with decreasing diverse representation moving up the staffing structure. Villegas warns of “ideological” responses by museums that are able to “mask material conditions” (Villegas and Sissokho, 2020). Thus, for intersectional analysis it is necessary to consider the implications of choosing to invest such a considerable sum into a grand refurbishment, rather than addressing issues of pay and pensions. Without negotiations, claims of increased equality in the institution will be contradicted by the Museum’s treatment of its essential staff and act as a distraction away from what would have a tangible impact on the most marginalised members of the Museum’s workforce – a fair, liveable wage.

Scepticism also surrounds the source of future funding. As the Museums Association (2022) reports, the Museum’s chairman George Osborne will raise the one-billion-pound pot required to cover the costs of refurbishment from a mix of private and public sources. Both streams of revenue have caused controversy. Simon Jenkins (2022), journalist writing for the Art Newspaper, highlights the hypocrisy of “demands [that] the taxpayer subsidise” the British Museum, contrasting the plea for public funds with Osborne’s own political history of “slashing spending” as former UK chancellor from 2010-2016, in the recent “age of austerity”. Others have been vocal critics of the British Museum’s choice of partners and sponsors from the private sector. For many years, there has been protest over the Museum’s partnership with multinational oil company, BP (formerly The British Petroleum Company). The third chapter of this thesis will explore this in more detail, but here it is worth noting that BP, a multinational oil and gas company, has been a sponsor of the British Museum since 1996, and the most recent 5-year sponsorship deal was due to end on the 19th February 2023. Neither party have announced a renewal or extension of this deal. The expiry of their contract suggests the end of any official partnership, but there is still some speculation as both “remain tight-lipped about the nature of their current and future association” (Addley, 2023). Consideration of the Museum’s choice of partners, including large-scale environmental polluters like BP, is particularly concerning when considering Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by climate change. Indigenous communities in Latin America are targeted for extractivist endeavours that target natural resources, fuel and water, and face the extremities of drought, floods, and displacement, particularly affecting given Indigenous worldviews and cosmology that support reciprocal relationships with nature and responsible custodianship of natural resources.

Thus, whilst the specific analysis of the current iteration of the Mexico Gallery may be displaced by new refurbishments in the British Museum in the foreseeable future, it is worthwhile to have established a benchmark against which to evaluate any new permanent exhibitions that emerge from the Rosetta project. In employing new collaborative curatorial approaches, the Museum may attempt to once again prove its value to the public as an institution through its radical Rosetta Project. However, institutional issues like staffing and fossil fuel funding present themselves as potential pitfalls of the project, and contradict the values the envisioned Rosetta project appears sets to undertake. That is, if and when these changes come into practice; with the current proposal set to take at least multiple decades, it could be a long time until new displays do in fact materialise for audiences.

Conclusions

To conclude, this chapter has employed decolonial analysis to consider how the British Museum approaches the exhibition of Prehispanic cultural heritage in its Mexico Gallery. Situated amidst historical ties to colonialism, and current calls to decolonise, the Museum's interpretation and curation of Indigenous communities from Mexico proves to be lacking. Through its historical foundations, the institution is proven to be faithful to Eurocentric epistemologies: biases towards Eurocentric narratives which frame non-European cultures as Othered, positivist frameworks, an assumption of a neutral positionality, and its centring of itself in an authoritative role. These biases which are present in the Museum are demonstrated to be of social concern given the power of the institution in its widely accepted didactic role. As a pedagogical institution, it is trusted by audiences to provide faithful representations of global cultures. Yet, it is evident that the British Museum has a long and complex history with colonialism that continues to influence its institution today. Indeed, as Caro Cocotle (2019) highlights of the western museum generally, the British Museum not only is passively influenced by its colonial past, but continues to perpetuate colonialist ideologies in the present. In its othering of Indigenous peoples and cultural heritage from Mexico, it appeals to a colonialist national identity, which centres the Anglo European and marginalises that which does not adhere to it.

This leads us to consider the narratives about Indigeneity that the British Museum disseminates through its permanent display of Mexican cultural heritage in Room 27, or the Mexico Gallery. Through analysis of the exhibition of Mesoamerican cultural heritage, the Museum's curatorial and interpretative approach is proven to be inadequate, if not actively damaging to Indigenous communities: as Latin American cultures are generally underrepresented, Central American cultural specificities are conflated, and contemporary Indigenous communities in Mexico are ignored, silenced and stereotypically represented through infrequent rotation and outdated interpretation and presentation of objects.

The impact of such representations of Indigeneity on audiences was then interrogated, supported by primary data collected from interviews and visitors surveyed in the Mexico Gallery. Calls for increased accessibility through multiple languages, consideration of support for alternative uses and emotional repercussions evoked in the space, and the interest of non-Indigenous audiences in a more profound exploration of contemporary communities and connections with coloniality demonstrate some areas in which the current iteration of Room 27 fails to meet the expectations of its audiences. With acknowledgement that the British Museum has recently pledged to radically overhaul its permanent gallery spaces as part of the Rosetta Project masterplan, this chapter also analysed proposals for potential futures of the institution, evaluating the Museum's own goals for increased representation of the Americas and more engaged collaboration with source communities, as well as highlighting potential contradictions regarding the future funding for the project and current labour conditions challenged by recent industrial action.

Whilst the Museum promises radical change with its upcoming Rosetta project, we are reminded to remain sceptical in speculation around the new displays, staffing, and funding sources. Thus, whilst the need for change in the institution is clear, the question of how the Museum might enact such change remains to be explored. In the following chapter, we look to an example of Mexican museology to see how this cultural heritage is curated, interpreted and exhibited in the country of its origin, and investigate whether there is knowledge that can be applied to future iterations of the Mexico Gallery in the British Museum.

2. Museo Nacional de Antropología

This chapter will offer a point of comparison against earlier analysis of the British Museum, by considering another institution: the Museo Nacional de Antropología (or MNA). With 22 rooms, spanning over 45 thousand square meters, it is Mexico's biggest museum (Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2024a). One might assume that a Mexican museum, at a closer relative distance to the source communities, may offer a different approach to collection and curation of similar objects. In the pages that follow, it will be argued that whilst each follows some distinct trends, the Mexican state museum does share common tendencies with the colonialist, Anglo European model of museology. In examining the relationship between the MNA and the Indigenous cultural heritage it exhibits, this chapter will explore how the Museo may therefore be situated in discussion of decolonising.

The MNA was founded in 1964, after several divisions of earlier museums starting in the eighteenth century. The core of the collection was formed of the personal collection of colonial-era collector Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci (1698-1749). This private collection was amassed from 1736 to 1744, and seized by the viceroyalty of colonial New Spain in 1743, where it passed hands between various colonial figureheads, leading some objects to be removed to Europe. In the wake of Mexican independence, this collection was transferred to the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, and into what became Mexico's national Gabinete de Historia Natural de México in 1790. In 1825, this was established as the National Mexican Museum by the first Mexican president, Guadalupe Victoria. In 1906, the collections undertook renovations and reordering, removing the natural history collections and reopening in 1910 as the National Museum of Archaeology, History and Ethnography. This was divided further in 1940, in its move to Chapultepec Park, as the Museo Nacional de Historia (focused on the period of conquest and colonial rule) and the Museo Nacional de Antropología (focused on pre-Colombian and contemporary Mexican ethnography). Its current iteration in the contemporary building in Mexico City opened September 17, 1964, under director Ignacio Bernal. Then-President of Mexico, Adolfo López Mateos (in Galindo Monteagudo, 2020, p.111), declared at its inauguration:

“In front of the testimonies of those [Pre-Columbian] cultures, the Mexico of today pays tribute to the indigenous people of Mexico, in whose example we recognize characteristics of our national originality.”

One might assume the Museo’s display of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico is an instance of self-representation. As outlined in the introduction, it is important to recognise again here that though there is overlap between the two, Mexican and Indigenous identities are distinct in many ways and ought not be conflated. As such, the MNA’s capacity to faithfully pay tribute to the country’s Indigenous communities has been challenged by some. More widely, Caro Cocotle (2019) warns of the "personification of difference", to describe the process of assumed validation or legitimation, based on a group or institution’s place. In their interview with Duncan (2021), Carballo highlights Mignolo’s proposal of Latin American museums specifically as a “branch” of European museology, emphasizing that for him this is a particularly significant trend in Mexico. As explored in the previous chapter, the European museum was founded as a colonial project and thus is founded on western, Eurocentric, and colonialist frameworks. In line with Mignolo’s critique, this chapter will argue that the MNA reproduces some of the foundational epistemologies found in these European institutions, which results in a singular dominant narrative which marginalises Indigenous peoples and knowledge. It will propose that through its adoption of *indigenismo*, the Museo reproduces the marginalisation of Indigenous communities whilst exploiting their cultural heritage to the benefit of the neocolonial nation-state. Using a similar framework for analysis, this chapter will consider the epistemological foundations of the Museo, the curation and interpretation of the permanent displays, and the subsequent impact on community access. In contrasting analysis of a British and Mexican state museum, we might reveal commonalities and differences that speak to how coloniality is perpetuated in the museum space, not only in the "west" itself, but replicated in regions considered in the colonialist logic as "non-western".

Western canons and epistemologies

To begin, this chapter will identify the knowledge frameworks upon which the Museo Nacional de Antropología is established. To demonstrate how the MNA may adopt similar

epistemologies to the western museum, we will consider their focus on positivism, value, and binaries, which each align with Eurocentric, Enlightenment thought as demonstrated in the first chapter of this thesis.

The first similarity between the MNA and the British Museum is their adoption of a positivist approach, which permeates both institutions to favour a singular, standardised approach to collections management. The categorisation of objects in the collections at the MNA mirror the trajectory of European ethnographic museums. This is clear in the shift from a chaotic "cabinet of curiosities" to a specialised institution with a specified discipline, prioritising reason, order, and rationalisation; intended to reflect the direction, too, of science's progress towards truth, as Bennett (1995, p.2) identifies in European examples of the trend. Similar to the British Museum, the Museo asserts itself as a centre of specialist, scientific knowledge. In its initial design, Bernal (1966, p.324), the first director of the Museo, emphasises that exhibition plans had a "scientific basis" and were designed "according to scientific... aims".

Whilst he writes shortly after the MNA's opening nearly sixty years ago, this positivist approach can also be seen in its current iteration. For example, it is evident in its online description of the conservation department, which is comprised of "specialists" that use their "technical-scientific... knowledge" to deliver a "modern conservation approach" - one that has to align to "international parameters" (Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2023b). In adopting this particular mode of expertise, it is clear that the Museo intends to adhere to an Anglo European framework which values positivist knowledge systems as "correct". The emphasis on the "specialised" and "scientific" knowledge appeals to a specific, narrow, and modernist understanding of knowledge, which favours a western conceptualisation of reason and rational thought, and thereby is exclusionary of alternative forms of knowledge.

This is not to imply a complete disregard for science as a field of study, nor to frame Indigenous knowledge as "non-scientific"; this would only serve to support biased stereotypes framing alternative knowledge systems as irrational. However, it is worth challenging how this bias towards an "incontestable faith in western science" found in the MNA affirms positivism as the sole correct knowledge system (Achim, 2021, p.233). In doing so, it also oppresses alternative, and possibly anti-positivist, knowledge systems. For example, the Museo privileges empirical verification of objects and their place in the chronological and geographical exhibition

design, leaving no room for histories that may value ancestral knowledge or oral traditions. These methods might propose different readings or understandings of the same objects, but with the MNA's positivist positioning, it would not allow for any deviation from the singular, rational and empirical proven historical narrative. In this way, the MNA may demonstrate the influence of Eurocentric epistemologies, through their adoption of positivist and Enlightenment values which are key in the colonialist logic.

Another Eurocentric epistemological framework reproduced in the MNA is their adoption of a value system that favours Eurocentric ideals over Indigenous values. In the first instance, the increased representation of Indigenous cultural heritage in the MNA might appear positive comparative to the lack of visibility in the fewer permanent displays at the British Museum. However, it may be considered that the aim of this increased representation is to flaunt the magnificence of Mexico's prehispanic cultural heritage, and in turn the MNA's selection and presentation of these objects reproduces western conceptions of "value". In selecting objects for the permanent displays, then-director Bernal (1966, p.324) describes how "certain valuable pieces" were chosen to represent each period in the exhibition halls. What the Museo considers as "valuable" aligns with Eurocentric standards, as objects are deemed important for their monetary value, rarity, or grandeur.

To interrogate this further, it is important to consider how the value of these objects is then utilised by the Museo. In the MNA, a national museum, impressive objects are used as evidence of national success. To demonstrate Mexico's own importance as a nation on a global stage, the MNA must adhere to universal, Eurocentric standards in order to demonstrate the objects' international relevance. This can be similar to the approach Salinas-Córdova (2023) describes in the British Museum collaboration, where Mexican state agents intended to present the Prehispanic past to the same level, or perceived value, as classical antiquity. However, this treatment of cultural heritage only considers an Anglo European criteria of what is deemed valuable. For example, objects may be considered 'valuable' for their international relevance, or their importance for contribution to scientific fields. The Museo holds Lintel 26, originally from Structure 23 in Yaxchilán – and part of a series of lintels deemed "among the most famous of all Maya monuments". (Brittenham, 2019, [Abstract]). Other lintels from the site, Lintel 24 and 25, were extracted from Mexico and moved by Alfred Maudsley in 1882 – to the British Museum,

where it remains today on display in the Mexico Gallery.¹⁰ Indeed, the British Museum describes the lintels as amongst the ‘masterpieces of Maya art’, which enacts western conceptions of value, especially in applying art historical terms to archaeological pieces (British Museum, 2017). That is, it employs similar language of ‘mastery’ which reflects understandings of value most often found in European art historical canons, which favour mastery of skill and technique, the individual ‘artist-as-genius’, and considerations of aesthetic above all else. As such, these lintels, surveyed as amongst the ‘most beautiful’ examples, are held by these national museums as internationally renowned examples of carvings from Maya Late Classic period, with several distinctive features that make them uniquely interesting to scholars: an unusual signature by the sculptor (or individual ‘artist-as-genius’, again referring to art historical understandings); well-preserved iconography of bloodletting ritual; a depiction of Lady K’abal Xoc, one of the few examples of female patronage surviving from ancient Mesoamerica (Miller, p. 18).

However, this adoption of western conceptions of value, i.e. the beauty and mastery of a cultural production, in the treatment of the Yaxchilán lintels and their movement into both national state museums, encourages a western way of looking and understanding of the value of these pieces. As Brittenham (2019, p. 8-9) highlights, the fundamental feature of a lintel is that they would not have been displayed as such in Structure 23. In their original context, they would not have been subject to viewing in the same way as today – as she describes within the discipline, a disembodied close looking, a silent and individual scopic encounter with the work of art in a museum, on the page of a book, or on a screen. This is similar to Achim’s (2021, p.226) description of how objects entering the collection undergo an "ontological shattering", as their accessioning, cataloguing, and movement into the collection transform the objects from things used in their original contexts into antiquities held by museums. In situ, they would have been positioned horizontally, not vertically, perpendicular to the viewer who would pass underneath the carving when entering the building, as an ‘integral part of an architectural experience’ (p. 9). Therefore, instead, they would have been subject to what Brittenham (2019, p.

¹⁰ Their value is made clear to visitors, as in the daily tour they are highlighted as “2 of 3 of the most important examples” from the site - with the third residing in the MNA. The lintels feature as one of the items in the British Museum’s ‘Around the World’ tour of the permanent galleries, thus ratifying its status as one of the most prized objects in the collection to show off to its visitors. It also featured as Object 51 in the ‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’ project with BBC Radio 4 (BBC, 2014).

10) deems an “embodied looking”, looking that was awkward, inconvenient, incomplete, and distracted, accompanied by movement, music, prayers, recitations, incense, sweat, and feasting.

Extracted from their original contexts, these lintels demonstrate how objects can be divorced from their use when moved into the museum. As Achim (2021, p.226) describes of the MNA’s acquisition procedure, objects entering the collection undergo an "ontological shattering", as their accessioning, cataloguing, and movement into the collection transform the objects from things used by communities into antiquities held by museums. This process fails to recognise the value of such objects within the source communities they originate from, such as in ritual as idols, or daily life as household objects. Items are made inaccessible for their original use, as their value too is transformed and described using a different language: of scientific importance, international relevance, or precious rarity. This language co-opts that used by European institutions, and can in turn be used to showcase Mexico’s importance as a nation-state in the international arena. That the Museo completes the series of lintels owned by the British Museum demonstrates how easily the understanding of these cultural heritage items may be transferred between the two museums, requiring little translation as the MNA’s understanding of its pieces mirrors, or mimics, a Eurocentric definition of value.

Another epistemological framework that permeates the MNA’s approach is a western conceptualisation of binaries, similar to that of the British Museum discussed in the previous chapter. Achim (2021, p.232) discusses how the Museo employs a binary rhetoric similar to that evoked repeatedly in the literature of modernization. This is used as a framework to enact power dynamics, by contrasting one concept with another: folklore-science, superstition-reason, natural-industrial. This framing both reinforces colonialist ideals and disregards any alternative systems of thought, as European ideals are presented as the universal norm, and the "other" is juxtaposed as incongruous and irrational. Scholars have noted how this polarised worldview presents itself in the western categorising impulses in the MNA’s labelling, which groups past and present Indigenous peoples into broad “ethnic types”, usually being vaguely attributed to wider major cultures than providing specific provenance (Achim, 2021, pp.220-1; López Hernández, 2021, pp.172-3).

The influence of a dichotomous conceptual framework is further demonstrated by the MNA’s approach to displaying gender. Throughout the archaeological halls, the object labelling

describes many objects from the Prehispanic era in terms of gender roles that are stereotypically “traditional” in the western worldview. Women are described primarily as mothers, caregivers, and restricted to certain activities adhering to these set roles in Mesoamerican society. Conversely, men are described as fighters, warriors, and providers. This display case (fig. 11) epitomises this divide, physically separating the two into the case, into two distinct realms: "*el mundo de la mujer*" (the world of the woman) and "*el mundo del hombre*" (the world of the man). Gender is presented as a binary of two extremes: the male and the female as two distinct, discreet categories. In fact, this model of male-hunter/female-gatherer, as implied by the MNA’s interpretation, has been disputed by archaeologists and sociologists as a colonialist heritage. Instead, Lugones proposes that before colonisation, conceptions of gender were less limited by binaries as those imposed by Spanish colonisers (Bhambra, 2014, p.118). This is still true of some Indigenous communities and attitudes today, like the Muxe third gender in Zapotec communities, and a failure to recognise this in the MNA's display suggests an Othering of this understanding of gender. The presentation of strict binaries in text surrounding gender in the Museo and failure to address alternative conceptions, demonstrates one way in which the MNA’s adoption of western frameworks, in this instance a binary framework of thought, presents itself in the permanent displays.



Figure 11: Archaeological display case at the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Mexican narratives of national identity and *indigenismo*

Whilst the foundations of the MNA show the influence of certain western epistemologies and Anglo European museological tendencies, it undoubtedly differs in its function. The Museo cannot be considered a colonial project. As a non-European institution, it would not hold motive to justify or enact colonialist narratives in the same way as the British Museum. However, we may propose that the Museo replicates similar colonialist frameworks to fulfil its own functions: to disseminate a national myth of *indigenismo*, and incite a sense of patriotism through its singular, controlled, dominant narrative.



Figure 12: Exterior of entrance to the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

The disparity in the sheer amount of Mesoamerican cultural heritage on display in the MNA demonstrates the difference in its content, and thus the focus of its narrative, in comparison to the British Museum. In the Museo, Mexico takes the role of protagonist. This is clearly communicated to the visitor before they even enter the Museo, as large, grand Mexican flags indicate on arrival, with an overt display of national iconography across the esplanade outside. Within the Museo itself, the entire exhibitory space is dedicated to displaying over 7761 archaeological and 5765 ethnographic objects from the region, as the largest museum in Mexico (Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2023c). This is far from the relatively few items on display in the UK, as analysed in the first chapter of this thesis; where the British Museum has one room dedicated to this content, the MNA has 23 (Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2023d). With more space for display, permanent galleries dedicated to both archaeology and ethnography beyond the Prehispanic era, and a sole focus on the region, one would assume the MNA is able to achieve a less homogenised version of Mexico's historical narrative. For example, its first

director, Bernal (1966, p.324) emphasised that the design intended to emphasise the differences between areas and periods of Mesoamerica. With entire rooms dedicated to each region as opposed to a singular case, this allows for a more culturally specific curation and interpretation of Mexican cultural heritage than is found in the British Museum's singular Mexico Gallery. In terms of practicality, more space in the museographic design would assumedly lead to an increased representation, and recognition, of Indigenous cultural heritage. However, some remain cynical of the MNA's aim of incorporating Indigeneity into its museological narrative. Instead, it is argued that the display of Prehispanic cultural heritage and contemporary Indigenous "ethnography" serves to benefit the nation-state, more than the source communities these objects belong to. In the national museum, these objects are stripped of their meaning to these communities, and reconfigured as symbols of Mexico and Mexicanness, used to "bolster a modern national identity" (Achim et al., 2021, p.4). This national identity is rooted within the Mexican phenomenon of *indigenismo*.

Indigenist thinking was a framework found across Latin America in nation-states attempting to consolidate their own national identity post-independence from colonisation. It employed the concept of Indigenous culture, often through the figure of the "Indian", in order to propose a unique post-revolutionary identity that was distanced from the coloniser culture. However, as Taylor (2005, p.80) identifies, this did not liberate Indigenous peoples but in fact facilitated and justified an accelerated internal colonialism in Mexico through the second half of the twentieth century, as *indigenismo* allowed state actors to co-opt the concept of Indigeneity without consultation of communities, nor allowing self-representation by Indigenous peoples themselves. The *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History* (2016) clarifies the proponents of *indigenismo* unique to Mexico: its extensive influence over state policy, used to transform the nation-state to an socioeconomic modernisation and unified national identity; the influence of anthropology in enacting Indigenist thinking; and the influence of the ideology of "mestizaje", which proposed a mestizo identity as the ideal outcome of the assimilationist and preservationist aims of *indigenismo*. This unique faith to both celebrating and silencing Indigeneity is particularly clear through actions that intend to exploit the unique impressive grandeur of Prehispanic culture, whilst simultaneously being intent on modernizing the "Indian",

as a "mute collective entity whose 'incoherent' local economic, cultural and political forms of organization presented obstacles to modernization and progress" (Taylor, 2005, p.80).

The *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (2016) identifies how *indigenismo* experienced a revitalisation with the opening of the MNA in 1964, as "the culmination of *indigenismo*'s nationalist ideology of integration and *mestizaje*". Iterations of *indigenismo* were strongly contested by anti-indigenist movements in years that follows, especially between the 1960s and 1970s, and nation-state agents in Mexico have since shifted towards a more multicultural narrative, but the influence of this original indigenist thinking is still clear in the MNA. As aforementioned, the permanent displays remain largely unchanged, and continue to perpetuate indigenist thinking. These displays demonstrate how colonialist frameworks in museums may also contribute to the continued oppression of Indigenous peoples. Whilst *indigenismo* as an official, state-sanctioned national program has come to an end, its legacy can still be felt in the mistreatment of Indigenous communities across Mexico. The frameworks of thought used to justify and facilitate this power dynamic, of state control over source communities, are present and further disseminated to the public in the Museo. We will consider three such techniques which reflect this, which utilise a colonialist logic also seen in European museums, and thus serve a neocolonial nation-state: the transformation of objects into symbols of nation, the (a)historicization of Indigenous peoples, and the pacification of Indigenous politics.

The first way in which Indigenous cultural heritage is exploited for the Mexican nation-state in the MNA's permanent displays is through transformation of cultural heritage objects into national symbols. In this way, Indigeneity is co-opted into Mexico's official narrative, for the benefit of the nation-state, as the abstract idea of Indigeneity is utilised as a "unifying symbol for the nation" (Achim et al., 2021, p.7). This finds its roots in the *mestizaje* ideology described above, as the "mestizo" identity was proposed as a utopic synthesis of modern and Prehispanic Mexico. Their transformation into easily consumable symbols is clear not only in the Museo, but across the nation, as images of Prehispanic objects have become ubiquitous in reproductions on T-shirts, postcards and tourist souvenirs (Achim et al., 2021, p.4). This is particularly true of one object held and displayed by the MNA: the Piedra del Sol. This object, and its image, is considered central to the collection, and it is also a key part of the Mexican national identity. Mexican archaeologist Salinas Córdova (2022a) establishes how this image has been

appropriated as a symbol of the Mexican nation-state outside of the museum, for example in official coins and bills. The Museo does not shy from capitalising on the symbolic importance of this iconography, with the object's display forming the crux of the visitor's journey in the museographic design. The Mexica gallery is central in the floorplan, directly in front of the visitor as they enter the Museo's courtyard and is one of the "must-see" galleries with the most objects on display. On entering the hall, the Piedra del Sol is immediately in the visitor's eyeline, and the first object they see on entering the room. After viewing, the visitor may then also find countless reproductions available to purchase in the gift shop.

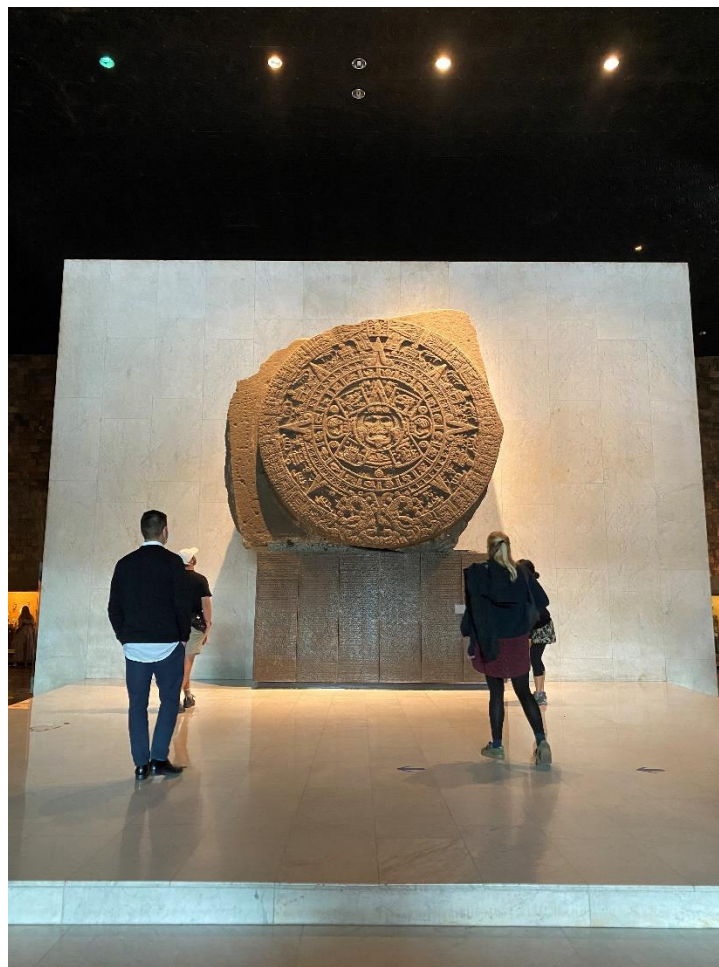


Figure 13: Piedra del Sol on display.

The way the MNA weaves this national unity myth, key to Mexico's national identity, through the display of symbolic objects is intentional. Bernal (1966, p.323) himself describes

how the museographic design encourages such interpretation, urging the visitor to understand that the separate cultures, though displayed in different halls, "form part of only one civilisation", "united in one coherent whole". Here we can see where MNA differs from its British counterpart, as it does aim to co-opt these objects as part of Mexican history and identity, whereas the British Museum contrasts Indigenous cultural heritage as oppositional to Eurocentric ideologies and its own nation-state identity. However, this conceptual framework of "unity", which seemingly intends to synthesise the concepts of "Mexicanness" and "Indigeneity" does not serve to benefit Indigenous communities themselves, but the nation-state apparatus. Through the MNA's presentation of these objects, they reproduce the conditions of indigenist thinking, in which non-indigenous agents hold a monopoly on the diffusion of Indigenous imagery and iconography, which includes present day use of the relics of their ancient past (Taylor, 2005, p.76). Thus, the MNA is able to transform the iconography of relics into symbols of national identity. But as Caro Cocotle (2019) argues, the recognition of marginalised groups into an "official historical narrative" is not sufficient if they lack the agency to use their own voice in curation and exhibition. Otherwise, the use of such symbols will only be to support an existing nation-state ideology. In this instance, *indigenismo*, which is harmful to Indigenous communities. Further, Vazquez Melken highlights that the concept of "unity" itself implies a dichotomy, and thus enacts western epistemologies of binary thinking, and in fact differentiates and others one group from another (Lezama, 2021, p.234). In this way, we can see how despite an apparent focus on "unity", the MNA may reproduce conceptual frameworks in its presentation of objects that favours state narratives over marginalised peoples and forms of knowledge, thereby reproducing a similar framework as is found in displays within European institutions.

This conflation of the Prehispanic past and "modern" Mexico is demonstrated best in the design of the contemporary building. The Museo is made of two floors. The ground floor is comprised of 11 halls of archaeology, organised by regions. The top floor is comprised of 10 halls, which intend to mirror a similar spatial organisation by geographies, but with a display of ethnographic material. The mirroring of the upper and lower floor plans, and their connection by various staircases, is designed to imply a conceptual connection between the two, as representative of past and present. As López Hernández (2021, p.173) describes, the spatial organisation allows audiences to visit first the archaeology then ethnography of a single region,

with some rooms linked easily by stairs so the visitor can physically travel between the past and the present. Bernal (1966, p.320) mirrors this conceptual linking of the two in his description of the museum design intended to convey "what the indigenous past and the ethnographic present are like". However, this linking of the Prehispanic past and Indigenous present of Mexico is criticised as oversimplified. Such a narrative intends to conceptually link the modern nation-state to a revered, "pure", Prehispanic past. Indeed, Roger Bartra is quoted in López Hernández (2021, p.182) as identifying this trend towards *indigenismo* within the MNA, as they "insinuate that the specularity of the pre-Hispanic past was connected to the grandeur of the modern revolutionary state". However, this overarching narrative of a unified historical continuity negates the contemporary lived experience of Indigenous peoples in Mexico, and ignores the complexities of Indigenous and Mexican identities in the present day.

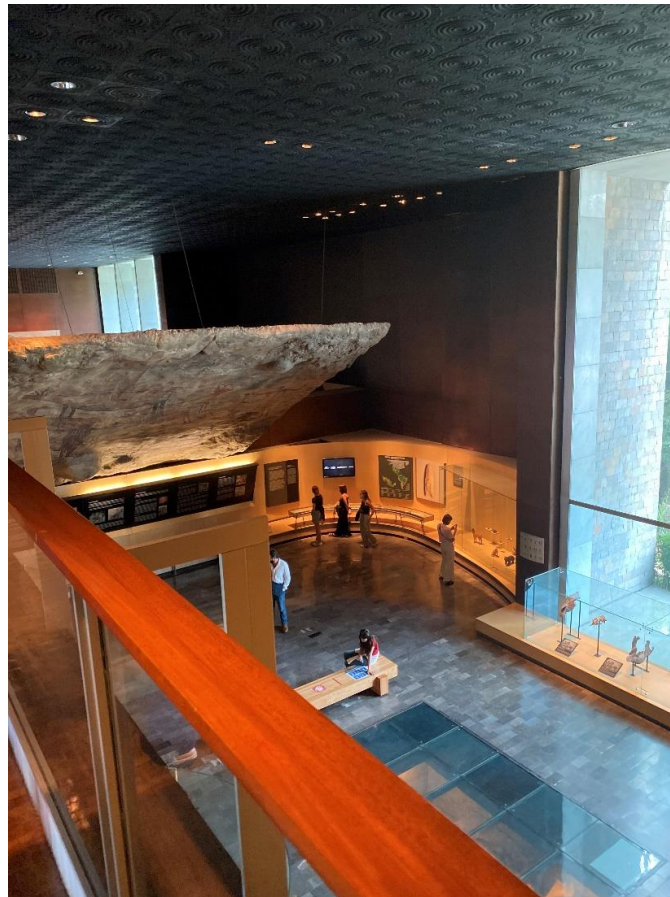


Figure 14: View from the upper ethnography floor, downwards into the lower archaeology halls.

Through conflating ethnography and archaeology in the museum's design, the MNA creates a hegemonic and historicised narrative of Indigeneity. As Achim (2021, p.232) describes, objects are transformed into antiquities through their acquisition into the collection, and are "relegated to an remote past" in the Museo similar to the European museum's tendency to relegate non-western objects to the "primitive" and "premodern". This encourages a stereotyped view of Indigeneity, as atemporal and thus folklorised; similar to the way in which Mexico is presented in the British Museum. Hence, it is demonstrated how through its employment of a colonialist logic, albeit with an indigenist angle, the MNA represents this history in such a way that affects Indigenous agency and diminishes Indigenous identity.

Such negation of contemporaneity is most pronounced in the ethnography halls. These halls have not been renovated nor remodelled since their opening in 1964, and have received considerable criticism for their presentation of contemporary Indigeneity. For example, García Canclini (1989, pp.165-177) argues the architectural split exaggerates a "stagnant, superficial profile of present-day Indigenous communities". Indeed, Taylor (2005, p.76; p.82) echoes critiques of the spatial organisation of the second floor, arguing that it reinforces the notion that Indigenous communities are only capable of "*reproducing*" a fixed set of "traditional", "authentic" cultural practices, rather than dynamic peoples capable of actively "*producing*" culture (emphasis in original). She references the life-size mannequins that are trapped in positions of an "endless, frozen engagement with their daily labors and festivities" (Taylor, 2005, p.82). In this way, the permanent second-floor display creates a static presentation of contemporary Indigenous cultures, as these models represent a singular and atemporal version of Indigeneity: both unconnected from time, and historicising through a lack of engagement with truly contemporary examples of Indigenous cultures. This interpretation also ignores the complexities of contemporary Indigenous identity in Mexico, by categorising cultures into clear, distinct "ethnic types", as mentioned earlier. This encourages an indigenist reading of Indigenous communities as "pure" and directly connected to Prehispanic ancestors. In fact, if any attempt were made to reconstitute a given archaeological object in the Museo to a specific contemporary group, it would be incredibly difficult to trace a clear lineage to a certain culture or community, given the impact of centuries of colonisation and cultural genocide.



Figures 15, 16 and 17: Examples of scenes with life-size models in the ethnographic halls.

As this example indicates, contemporary Indigenous identity in Mexico is incredibly complex, but the topic is not thoroughly addressed in the MNA's permanent displays. There has been further exploration into current Indigenous cultures in the MNA's temporary exhibitions, which often focus on more specific eras of history, regions or themes. Recent example includes *Naná Wárho Agostu* (November 2022 to April 2023) and *Culto a Las Ánimas en Tiríndaro, Michoacán* (October 25 to November 20, 2023), both of which explore regionally specific Purépecha traditions and how they have developed in local communities across centuries to how they are celebrated the present day. For example, the latter worked with the community of Tiríndaro to recreate for visitors a sample of their custom around the visit of the souls, using displays of shrines and other items used today in meals, music, dances and other rituals that honour the dead (Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2024b). As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the trend of using temporary exhibitions like these to incorporate updated, contemporary interpretation and innovative community engagement strategies like co-curation is also found in European museums, as changes to permanent displays can be slow-moving and major renovations are described as "multi-generational" undertakings. Whilst this project has limited scope to explore this mode of exhibiting, it should be emphasised that at a certain point, this tension between innovative special exhibits and outdated permanent displays reveals a contradiction in the outputs of the Museo. The outdated representations of a supposed

“Indigeneity” in the ethnographic halls actively reproduce a colonialist view of contemporary Indigenous communities, as stereotypes of Indigeneity are disseminated to the Museo’s audiences. This questions the Museo’s capacity to respectfully and faithfully curate Indigenous cultural heritage. Similar to the British Museum, if the MNA does intend to represent “contemporary” Indigenous cultures, it must take a less passive role to this interpretation in the permanent halls, and provide the means to communities to represent and recognise the contemporary experiences they face.

In this vein of thought, we may consider the third way the MNA marginalises Indigeneity for the purpose of national identity: the pacification of Indigenous communities. As highlighted above, the MNA limits autonomous self-representation of Indigenous identity in the museum space, through their biased presentation of Indigeneity as atemporal and stereotypical in the ethnographic halls. Another way in which the Museo strips Indigenous peoples of such agency is through depoliticising Indigeneity. Through their display, the MNA is able to quash the political potential of objects, and reassign meanings to cultural heritage items that align with its own singular, state-approved narrative. For example, there is an absence of reference to contemporary Indigenous movements actively fighting for political autonomy and Indigenous rights, as Rufer (2021) highlights in a chapter on the obfuscation of violence through concepts of “culture” within the MNA. This aligns with the static view of Indigenous culture perpetuated in the ethnographic halls. Even when there is reference to recent fights for rights, the label syntax contains little detail and carefully chosen apolitical language. For example, Rufer (2021, pp.244-5) also describes how the brief mention of the 1994 Zapatista Uprising in the Maya Highland gallery, the Museo’s interpretation of Zapatismo subtly deescalates and disregards the radical nature of the movement. Interpretative panels focus first on how “some [Maya] highlanders opt for negotiation, others for litigation”, centring on more reformist efforts. Then, violence is mentioned and framed as a less important and less favourable approach: “still others choose to take up arms”. In a display intended to represent the Indigenous present, a lack of recognition of such substantial and influential contemporary movements serves to detract from tensions between the Mexican state and Indigenous groups fighting for political autonomy.

This depoliticisation of the upper halls appears conscious, especially in comparison to the lower halls. One floor below, mentions of violence are not only present but often emphasised in

the archaeological displays. Interpretative panels describe in detail sparring between Mesoamerican cultures, violent subjugation by Spanish colonisers, and fighting back against colonial forces. The contrast between the militant Prehispanic past and the pacified Indigenous present seems to employ a passive approach to interpretation where it suits the state-sanctioned narrative. In exploiting the Prehispanic past to evoke a patriotic image of glory, yet ignoring present experiences of Indigeneity in the upper halls, the Museo evokes a similar silencing of contemporary Indigenous voices. The lack of reference to contemporaneity in the interpretation of permanent displays can in this way be considered a reproduction of power relations also found in Eurocentric frameworks. In many ways, through its failure to actively engage with themes important to contemporary Indigenous groups, the MNA may reflect as much as the absence of reference to contemporary Indigeneity in the British Museum. Whilst more misrepresentation than underrepresentation, it still suppresses the political potential of the permanent displays, presents a passive view of the source communities, and structurally silences alternative epistemologies and experiences and diminishes Indigenous identity in the present day.

To conclude, while the ideological end differs, the permanent displays in the Museo do replicate frameworks found in the British Museum. The British Museum, as a bastion of Eurocentrism, and the MNA, whose focus is Mexicanness, both adhere to the definition by Caro Cocotle (2019) of the museological institution as a general concept. That is, they function as a "producer and preserver of heritage and memory for the nation-state", and do so through the marginalisation of already Othered communities.

Control of cultural heritage and community access

Through its epistemological foundations and function of serving the Mexican nation-state, this chapter has so far demonstrated how the Museo exercises control over the Prehispanic cultural heritage in its curation and interpretation of permanent displays. This section will further consider the implications this has on access for Indigenous communities. It will argue that the Museo demonstrates reticence to concede any power or control over its production of narratives and knowledge within Mexico itself, through its centralised location, collections management systems and subsequent impact on community access.

The first way the MNA exercises such control is through the centralised management of collections, administered by large government bodies instead of local community agents. In Mexico, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) is the governmental body responsible for the care of cultural heritage in Mexico. As Hoobler (2006, pp. 447-8) highlights in their chronology of Mexican museology, in the 1970s this body faced a lot of criticism in the wave of anti-*indigenismo* efforts, as scholars called for decentralisation of collections and devolution from state control to community museums. Many argued the processes were overly bureaucratic, and this resulted in a proliferation of cultural heritage in the capital city. The objects found in excavations across the country would then be moved to the capital to be housed in one of the many museums there, including the MNA. Indeed, still now cultural heritage can be found concentrated in Ciudad de México, as the capital counts some 181 museums (Sistema de Información Cultural, 2023). This state intervention conveyed a patronising message to local communities, implying a lack of trust that they may care for their own heritage at a regional level, instead claiming it as national cultural heritage to be protected by larger museums. This can be compared to the "salvage paradigm" found in European museums, outlined by Clifford (1989), in which objects from the "non-West" must be "rescued" by western institutions in order to protect them, as it is stereotypically assumed that the source communities are unable to care for their own cultural heritage themselves. Often, this follows the colonialist logic, in which "care" of cultural heritage is determined by a set of specific quantifiable standards. For example, we might again consider the international guidelines set out by ICOM or UNESCO, which Carballo argues impose a "westernised vision" of what the museum should or should not be (Duncan, 2021). The Museo's compliance with universal museological standards is clear in description of their conservation efforts, which align with positivist "international parameters" (Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2023b). Placed in contrast with an internationally approved institution, stereotypes of "premodern" and "irrational" societies are weighed against communities and used to justify the need for outside intervention. As evidenced in the previous chapters, similar patterns of paternalistic thinking are routinely employed in the British Museum's repeated efforts against repatriation, especially against the highly contested Benin Bronzes and Parthenon Marbles.

The MNA and INAH, as Mexican institutions, are not affected by arguments of international repatriation in the same way as the British Museum. The British Museum is often cited as an epitomal example for the violent removal of cultural objects from their ancestral homelands by colonial forces that expanded across the British Empire's rule. On the international stage, Mexico may be better framed as a victim of such colonial collecting activities, as items were removed from Mexico under Spanish colonial rule, and are still held and traded across Europe today through the contemporary colonialist cultural heritage market. In fact, the Mexican state has been vocal in this role within restitution debates, especially of late under the governmental administration of its current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. For example, the state-run "Mi Patrimonio No Se Vende" campaign began the same year as his inauguration, in 2018. The campaign continues and in recent years has repeatedly made public calls against the sale of Prehispanic relics in European auction houses, most recently in April 2023, as part of wider diplomatic efforts to restrict the illegal trafficking of Mexican antiquities, and instead recover and return them to the country (Lambertucci, 2023; Galván, 2022). However, the way the Mexican state treats these objects once they are returned to Mexico contradicts their assumed line of argument. The state is not willing to then "return" objects themselves to source communities or Indigenous peoples. As Pérez Ruiz (2008, p.93) highlights, procedures still follow a top-down approach, with national museums held in the highest regard as they are considered the "most specialised" and given the most resources. This means the MNA is granted prioritised access and control of cultural objects deemed valuable, or considered important to serve the national interest. In this way, the Mexican nation-state, and thus the MNA, employs an intranational framework of control that mimics the colonialist framework outlined in discussions of international repatriation, by placing themselves in the role of the "west", and Indigenous communities in the role of "non-west", or Othered. Where it is a victim of colonialist collecting on the international stage, it itself reflects similar impulses to hoard cultural heritage, over-bureaucratise its management, and thus hold ultimate control over objects on a national scale. This therefore limits the access specific source communities have to Indigenous cultural heritage in Mexico.

The central role in cultural heritage guardianship that the MNA assumes is also reflected in the geographical centralisation of its site. Another way in which the Museo may reproduce

colonialist frameworks, and centralisation, is through its choice of location for its permanent site, and thus its conceptualization of place. Both national museums, the British Museum and the MNA, are located in the capital cities of the respective countries they are representatives of. Borrowing from the concept of "power centres" of knowledge production, discussed by Brulon Soares and Leshchenko (2018, pp.64-5) to describe the Anglocentrism of museum studies as a field, the tangible location of the Museo's site further reflects the geographical centralisation of knowledge production. This idea of "centre" is evoked through its capital city location, which itself evokes colonial ideals and binaries, especially the opposed concepts of city-country or urban-rural. Such binaries are used in the colonialist logic to define a civilised society as an industrial one, and thus, unindustrial as uncivilised. Achim et al. (2021, p.8) identify how MNA's building was "carefully orchestrated to fulfil [its] ideological project". With its "centralist mission", the singular location was intended to be relative to a single country, as the MNA was developed as a "stand-in for the nation". To reflect this narrative of the importance and legitimacy of the nation-state, the architects chose the capital city, in particular Chapultepec Park, as "an area with skyscrapers and innovative urban infrastructure that represented Mexican modernity" (2021, p.8). As evidenced in the previous chapter, Anglo European public museums were similarly built in capital cities, considered to be industrialised, civilised centres, with the same aim to flaunt the achievements of the modern nation state. The MNA replicates this framework of centralisation. Through its location, it intends to enact colonialist ideals and stereotypes of a "modern" museum. In this way, the MNA appeals to Anglo European ideals by mirroring a colonialist conception of museology, and thus illustrates Carballo's proposal well: that the museum is assumed as infrastructure that is a necessity for proof of achieving modernity (Duncan, 2021).

This centralisation comes at a cost for Indigenous communities in terms of access. Visitors from outside of the capital face physical barriers to enter the museum space, and connect with cultural heritage on display. This evidences another way in which the Mexican state exercises control through the national state museum, as access to the objects is physically restricted. It is worthy of note that the INAH has made some attempts at decentralisation of cultural bureaucracy, most prominently the *museos comunitarios* scheme beginning in the 1970s (Hoobler, 2006, pp.448-50). These will be explored further in the following chapter, but in the

context of comparison with the MNA, it is worth bearing in mind that they are considered further down the hierarchy of the top-down Mexican museum structure outlined earlier by Pérez Ruiz (2008, p.93), especially in comparison to the MNA. Furthermore, the opening of the MNA in its current iteration and location predates such efforts to decentralise. As such, the Museo remains as a reflection of the earlier first wave of Mexican museology, and thereby disrupts any later attempts at decentralisation, presenting itself as a contradictory project. Arguably, it may also be considered that the placement of Indigenous cultural heritage in a metropolitan location arguably disrupts what Caro Cocotle (2019) deems the colonialist hierarchization of city and country, and subverts binary thinking which opposes the modern metropole and folkloricised rural periphery stereotypically associated with Indigenous cultures. If this disruption to colonialist binaries is a byproduct of the MNA's location in Ciudad de México, it should not be attributed as its intention. Instead, the aim of the Museo's placement is control, and for the benefit of the national over the regionally specific. Thus, through MNA's location in Mexico's capital, like the British Museum's London location, the site alludes to a similar emphasis on place as metaphorical and material evidence of a modernist progress. Thus, through its choice of location for its permanent museum site, both national institutions reproduce the concept of the museum as a symbol of modernity for their respective nation-states.

In doing so, the MNA creates barriers to community access to cultural heritage, as it enacts similar institutional issues as European museums. Through both practical and conceptual exclusionary frameworks, Indigenous peoples as visitors are made to feel unwelcome, unheard and uninvited in the space. Therefore, despite its much closer geographical proximity than the British Museum, the presentation and interpretation of cultural heritage on display still inhibits outreach that involves source communities in the Museo. In some ways, the MNA has attempted to make their collections more practically accessible to visitors, especially through governmental cultural policies. As a state-run museum, they have been subject to national efforts to reduce economic barriers. Whilst there is, under Article 288 of the Ley Federal de Derechos, a fee to enter the museum, Mexican residents pay a reduced fee to enter the Museo and the INAH ensures free entry to Mexican residents on Sundays under this law (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2010). Whilst less frequent than the daily free entry to the British Museum's permanent displays, it is a comparable effort at policy to make public museums economically accessible.

However, it must be recognised that access to the Museo may require cultural as well as economic capital. Vazquez Melken highlights how the museum can be considered a space for the formation of elites through such cultural capital (Lezama, 2021, p.238). There is certainly an expectation of the assumed visitor of the MNA. Bernal (1966, p.324) discusses how the MNA was planned with the "serious visitor" in mind; an intellectual. This implied didactic aim of the MNA aligns with trends of the first wave museology in Mexico, described by Pérez Ruiz (2008, p.95) as "*educativa y comunicativa*" (educational and communicative). This leads to a power dynamic in the relationship between a museum and its audience: the museum enunciates its narrative, and the visitor receives it. Bennett (1995, p.11) identifies similar forms of relationships between the European museum and its visitors. First, whilst a public institution, he recognises the appropriation by ruling elites as a symbolic site for the bourgeois "*cognoscenti*" to distinguish themselves from the "masses". This is possible due to the cultural capital held by certain visitors over others to be familiar with the certain forms of reception the museum permits: with the practice of "showing and telling", and treating visitors as "essentially, 'minds on legs'" (1995, p.6).

Of course, social inequality within Mexico exists to a similar extent as any other nation, and so barriers to access may present themselves between groups within the region much like they have done between differing social classes in Europe and the United Kingdom. Whilst the Museo cannot be blamed for producing this inequality more than reflecting such circumstances, it can be criticised for reproducing this unequal dynamic in its framework for visitor engagement, that limits access for communities who both value other systems of knowledge, forms of reception, and have historically faced a systemic lack of access to cultural capital and thus institutions like the Museo. As McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan (2021, p.103) discuss in their paper on archives, alternative forms of reception may reduce the feeling of unwelcomeness for Indigenous communities caused by traditional heritage processes. Similarly, Pérez Ruiz (2008, p.90) advocates for a change in the relationship between Mexican institutions and the public they serve, from museum to visitor, to museum *and* visitor (emphasis mine). In this way, Vazquez Melken argues we may introduce alternative forms of reception in the museum, proposing more efforts to listen instead of "dictate", based on Indigenous methodologies (Lezama, 2021, p.238). However, in its current efforts, the MNA perpetuates the

power dynamic seen in European museums, offering only one form of reception and thus the visitor is reduced to the same as in the British Museum: a spectator that will consume and incorporate into themselves the dominant vision, or narrative offered by the nation-state. In this way, the MNA reproduces issues of accessibility seen in the British Museum, as it is found to be uninviting for certain groups who find themselves marginalised through the Museo's privileging of an assumed certain type of visitor.

Conclusions

To summarise, it is evident that the MNA does reproduce forms of coloniality as seen in European museums within its permanent displays of Indigenous cultural heritage. Despite offering a more prolific representation of Indigenous cultural heritage, and a closer proximity to the source communities it intends to represent, in many ways the Museo's approach cannot be considered an entirely faithful nor respectful representation of Indigeneity. Above all, this is evidenced through the persistent influence of *indigenismo* within the MNA, a neocolonial national epistemology that systematically oppresses Indigenous peoples in Mexico and marginalises Indigenous forms of knowledge. To enact these indigenist narratives, the Museo employs similar Anglo Eurocentric and colonialist tendencies as are found in European museology, as is demonstrated through comparison with a counterpart in the United Kingdom, the British Museum.

The Museo's epistemic foundations and structural frameworks reproduce Eurocentric ideals, of positivism, value, and colonialist binaries. In its curation and interpretation of the permanent displays, the influence of European Enlightenment frameworks of thought is most clear in the outdated, static displays of the upper ethnography halls, which present a historicised and stereotypical view of Indigeneity without reference to contemporary Indigenous peoples beyond pacified interpretations. Despite the significant extent of Mesoamerican cultural heritage presented in the permanent exhibitions, the state still enacts ultimate control over these objects, with a centralised approach resulting in a lack of access through physical and cultural barriers for source communities.

In this way, this chapter has illustrated that the Museo cannot be assumed to be respectfully representative of Indigenous peoples in Mexico solely because it is Mexican. We

might again consider Carballo's description of the Latin American, and especially Mexican, museum as a "branch" of the European tradition (Duncan, 2021). In analysis of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, it is evident that the MNA has not unsettled the basic epistemic categories employed in European museums, but rather rebranded them to suit the dominant narrative of the Mexican state. In conforming to the values and requirements of Eurocentric museology, the MNA succeeds in constructing a singular contrived narrative of national history, in which a distant Indigenous past is contrasted to the modern Mexican present, yet also appropriated within it. In this way, it adopts the role not of a critic of Eurocentric epistemology, but a reproduction of it, for the benefit of the Mexican nation-state. Where the British Museum does so with the "non-West", the modern Mexican nation-state does so intranationally with its Indigenous population; thus, it presents itself as a microcosm of the same trend, on an intra- rather than inter-national scale.

3. Alternative Approaches

In Chapters 1 and 2, this dissertation has looked at two examples of major national survey museums, and how they present the Prehispanic cultural heritage items they hold in their collections in their permanent displays. Through this comparative analysis, employing a decolonial framework, this thesis outlines and identifies how both the British Museum and Museo Nacional de Antropología may reproduce coloniality in the museum. The British Museum is illustrative of a Eurocentric museology, with its curation Othering non-European cultures in order to centre an Anglo European nationalism. The Museo Nacional de Antropología, despite forming part of a country "Othered" by this thinking, still replicates a similar museology for its own patriotic ends, thereby reproducing a neocolonial narrative which subjugates Indigenous peoples of Mexico. So, it has been demonstrated how these two examples may fit with decolonial scholars' descriptions of museums as institutions that epitomise cultural regulation, legislation, and control. As we have seen, this control seeps through the entire structure of the museum, from curation and interpretation to conservation and community engagement. So, how can the museum proceed in terms of decolonising? How can the museum exist in the future without perpetuating this colonialist system of control and regulation of a visitor's perception of the world?

One key element of decolonial theory is the focus on theory-praxis. It does not serve the cause to solely identify and discuss issues, but to propose and enact practical, impactful change to address them. As Vasquez-Melken emphasises in his summative description of the movement in Lezama (2021, p.229), decolonial theory does not only seek a "deconstruction". So whilst this thesis has critically examined the two museums, it is also important to conceptualise practical ways forward towards potentially decolonial futures. Thus, this chapter will outline some of the most pressing contemporaneous changes seen in both the British Museum and the Museo Nacional de Antropología. Within this, we can see a few major trends in the alternative approaches to collecting, curating and caring for Prehispanic cultural heritage. Here, they are grouped into four sub-chapters: adaptation, addition, interventions, and abolition. These categories should not be considered distinct or definitive. In the pluriversal worldview, it is

fundamental to recognise the heterogeneity of ideas and approaches, and how some of the following examples may overlap, or contain contradictions within themselves.

This theoretical approach may be considered similar to Arrieta and Roigé's framework, to analyse the four major approaches museums tend to take in response to the "end" of colonialism and rise of multiculturalism (Arrieta et al., 2016, p.345). They categorise this as follows: perspectiva estética, perspectiva crítica, perspectiva multicultural, perspectiva autóctona. Using a similar structure, my four categories aim to make sense of the ways in which these museums might respond to calls to "decolonise", given a lack of response so far. This chapter is included as it is important to recognise potential upcoming challenges to the arguments covered in this dissertation. However, it cannot serve to investigate all related examples in detail, nor offer a definitive evaluation of each category. Instead, it serves to offer a method of understanding contemporary changes, as well as to highlight key points of interest and encourage further research into these trends.

Adaptation

First, this analysis considers the institutions themselves: the British Museum and Museo Nacional de Antropología. As identified in the preceding chapters, both seem reticent to change, and largely disengaged from contemporary developments in the museological sector. This is evidenced by their permanent displays, left untouched since the inauguration of the Mexico Room in 1994, and the MNA in 1964. Yet, it must be recognised that there are some attempts within the institutions to adapt to a changing museological landscape.

Changes to the permanent displays

One imminent change to take into account will be the planned redisplay of permanent collections at the British Museum. As outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, the Rosetta Project is the institution's "masterplan" to radically overhaul the permanent galleries and make underrepresented cultures more visible, particularly Africa, Oceania and the Americas (Museums Association, 2022). In this redisplay, the British Museum plans to adapt a new curatorial approach, particularly by adapting to include more "consultation" and "collaboration with communities", and even potentially "polyvocal" strategies that incorporate multiple voices in a

singular interpretation (Frost, 2023). This is further demonstrated by the recent "Curator of Oceania" vacancy at the Museum, one of the areas whose underrepresentation is to be addressed in the refurbishment. The job description posted online outlines that the institution is "actively seeking someone who can build and nurture relationships with source communities and pursue strategies of collaboration and co-curation" (Arts Council England, 2023). As identified in Chapter 1, increased collaboration and new avenues of communication with source communities are approaches welcomed by visitors, and in line with decolonial methodologies, as thinkers highlight the importance of disrupting the white, curatorial voice. Therefore, the affirmation of increased representation of Indigenous voices at a decision-making level would be a promising development towards a more autonomous self-representation.

Unfortunately, however, the hiring practices do not reflect this posited increased inclusion of marginalised voices. Recruitment processes continue to discourage diversity in the workforce at a curatorial level. In the aforementioned Oceania post, requirements include a degree-level education in Anthropology, curatorial experience, publications in peer reviewed journals or books, and "ideally" a post-graduate qualification too (Arts Council England, 2023). Each of these criteria limit potential applicants, and privilege those who are more likely to be able to gain experience and "expertise" in privileged fields and sectors; often middle-class, white applicants who have the financial and cultural means to be able to succeed in academic and curatorial fields with less barriers or resistance. In this way, the Museum stills acts as a gatekeeper, and thus invites scepticism of the extent to which the institution is in fact willing to welcome source communities into this new approach. If source communities are excluded from the higher-level positions, where does the Museum expect this "collaboration" to fit in to the staffing structure? Will "consultation" be remunerated, or are those contributing to the "polyvocality" of exhibitions expected to do so voluntarily, as is often the case in the museum and heritage sector? The power dynamics enacted by hiring practices and thus staffing structures will affect these proposed collaborative approaches. Without recognising the value of their voices, and their lived experience over academic or career "expertise", the extent to which interpretation will be informed by source communities is yet to be seen. Without structural changes and increased representation at a decision-making level, in spite of claims of a new curatorial approach, a refurbishment may only lead to another reaffirmation of Western

principles of narration, rather than the new narrative approaches it desires. No measures appear to be in place to facilitate collaboration with source communities so far; if so, the inaccessibility of higher posts in the Museum contradicts their claims to place value on voices outside of the norm of whiteness found in their current staffing.

Potential changes to the permanent displays seem less imminent in the Museo Nacional de Antropología. With many displays as old as the British Museum's, and the museum celebrating its sixtieth anniversary next year, it could be argued the permanent displays are equally due for renovation. Whilst the current administration is enthusiastic to celebrate and defend cultural heritage in the public eye, seen in the "Mi Patrimonio No Se Vende" campaign discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, it is also the case that INAH is facing a crisis in terms of funding and infrastructure (Salinas Córdova, 2022b). Hence, no similar plans appear to be on the public radar at the time of writing.

Digital projects

Another key development to recognise is the changing digital landscape for museums. Both the British Museum and Museo Nacional de Antropología had already begun investing into their digital infrastructure before the COVID-19 pandemic, but this context has prompted museums across the globe to rethink their relationships with digital audiences as quarantine changed ways of working online. Increased engagement with novel, digital methods of museology may also offer institutions the opportunity to reevaluate their traditional working practices and potentially integrate more decolonial approaches. One such method is the digitisation of museum collections. In their survey of decolonial digitisation in Dutch archives and institutions, Jeurgens & Karabinos (2020, p.205) identify that the process of digitisation both increases public access to records held by institutions, and also allows museum to reevaluate their own frameworks and dismantle existing colonial archival frameworks (2020, p.207). They recognize some institutions that have begun work to recontextualise objects, using decolonial praxis to incorporate Indigenous knowledges into their digital practice. Some further examples of such decolonial praxis in the process of digitising collection could include reflecting on methods of classification, offensive terminology, or colonial histories of objects.

The increased accessibility of digital collections for users, or digital "visitors", is also an important factor to consider. The ability to view and research cultural heritage items held in one country whilst physically in another, via the internet, is an important and relevant change caused by recent digital projects. One major project in response to COVID-19 was the relaunch of the BM Collection Online in April 2020. It was described as the site's biggest update since its inception, providing easier online access to 4.5 million objects in the collection (British Museum, 2021, p.24). The Museo Nacional de Antropología has a similar, ongoing digitisation project. "El Proyecto de Digitalización de las Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Antropología" is a collaboration between the Museo Nacional, INAH, the Secretaría de Cultura and the Mexican branch of photography company Canon. The project aims to create the first bank of high-resolution digital images of the Museum's collections, and to date, more than eight thousand archaeological pieces and six thousand of the ethnographic collections on display have been digitized (Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2023e).

These digital updates will make both Museum's collections more accessible than before. Within this, the influence on international access must not be ignored. In the British Museum's 2020-21 report, the institution reported 3.75 million visits to the Collection Online, an increase of 60%; digital events engaging audiences in excess of 1 million from over 50 countries; and over half a million new social media followers globally (British Museum, 2021, p.7). Whilst these figures will also be influenced by changes in typical activity amidst COVID-19 quarantines, the potential for worldwide reach of online engagement strategies is demonstrated in these figures, and the possibilities of digital methods are made clear. However, it is also necessary to ensure that institutions do not become complacent in their view of new digital methodologies, as a technologically deterministic assumption of recent technologies bringing "progress" can be equally damaging.

As Maurer (2022, p. 63-64) warns, without the necessary time, funding, expertise, and active co-creation by Indigenous peoples from the beginning, digital workflows can end up not "adapting", but simply adopting and replicating existing colonialist paradigms. For example, an object record made openly accessible and available online that reproduces outdated language used in its original cataloguing may just increase the probability of an Indigenous user being faced with offensive terms that may cause distress or offence. In some cases, descriptions pulled

directly from existing catalogue records are made publicly available to view alongside the material as they are published online. In the British Museum, across records in the online collection database, Latin American Indigenous communities are referred to using the term 'Indians' in historic 'Curator's comments' attached to the record. For example, as a descriptor added to the Tapajos in Brazil (Am1953,02.4) (British Museum, 2024b), or used as a generic indicator without regional specificity in Peru (Am1955,08.14) (British Museum, 2024c). There is no sensitivity warning, signposting, nor clearly outlined acknowledgement of these terms alongside the use of this language. Instead, better practice would actively reflect on considerations like language as records are processed and made available online, especially in consideration of the user interface given that it could be the primary point of access for audiences abroad. As the British Museum intends these digital outreach efforts to increase their global reach, they are more likely to reach Indigenous peoples, situated in Latin America. However, instead of focusing only on increasing the quantity of interactions with these audiences, the Museum should also consider the quality of these interactions, and whether they are carried out respectfully and without causing offence to those that visit their digital platforms.

Thus, whilst there is potential for the digitisation of museum collections, amongst other digital engagement methods, to make museum practice more accessible and decolonial, it should not be taken as a given. Instead, the actual impact of continuing digital projects in both the British Museum and the Museo Nacional de Antropología ought to be measured and monitored through further research. This is particularly vital as both are major institutions with the resources to invest in emerging methods of digital outreach, who may lead the field in coming years. For example, in the British Museum's recently announced plans to undergo a large-scale project to digitise the entirety of its collections (from the viewpoint of a security concern in light of the thefts in 2023), it will be important to see if such principles are reflected in the strategic planning and delivery of such a major project.

These two parts, digital and physical changes within the museum, cover the two major ways in which the museums discussed in this research project themselves are trying to "adapt" to contemporary demands in museology, particularly faced with calls for increased representation and access. However, many decolonial thinkers remain sceptical about the extent to which the institutions themselves can enact truly self-reflective, and structural change; especially that

which will require fundamental transformation and critique, rather than shallow adjustments that will serve their own self-interests. In proposed adaptations to the museum, the impact of new projects should be monitored, and the efficiency of novel approaches should be evaluated. This will ensure that any claims of changing museum practice are confirmed to be truly and tangibly enacted, as opposed to surface-level engagement to placate calls to decolonise the museum, without deeply committing to the extensive time, effort, and care such an undertaking requires.

Addition

The second section will consider two projects I will describe as "additive" to the core institutions of the British Museum and Museo Nacional de Antropología. That is, they are large offshoot projects that fall under the same organisational umbrella. Both work in tandem and in close collaboration with the larger institutions themselves, yet each body is distinct enough to be considered alone as a separate category in this proposed framework of understanding: SDCELAR as additive to British Museum, and *museos comunitarios* as additive to the MNA. These complementary bodies incorporate much more radical approaches than the two core museums, with experimentations in curatorial and cultural practice. Yet, the extent to which they can be considered entirely separated from the institutional structure is open to debate, and presents unique complications in their engagement with decoloniality.

SDCELAR

The Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence in Latin American Research (i.e. SDCELAR) is an organisation within the British Museum solely focused on its Latin American collections, established in 2019. The Centre exists to promote research by academics, artists, and source communities, and encourage experimental, alternative, and disruptive forms of engagement with objects the British Museum holds. These interventions include artist residencies, published works of fiction, digital exhibitions, and more. In its own words, SDCELAR's work "acknowledges the manifold legacies of colonialism that 'western' anthropology and history museums embody" (SDCELAR, 2023). Indeed, the Centre and its past leadership have been explicitly vocal about efforts to employ radical approaches to museology, often citing decolonial discourse and thinkers in their own work. In *Mapping the New Museum*, a survey of past

research projects supported by SDCELAR, past directors Jago Cooper and Laura Osario Sunnucks both explicitly refer to Walter Mignolo and other decolonial thinkers in describing the centre and its work (Osorio Sunnucks and Cooper, 2022).

This open-minded perspective to decolonial theory can be demonstrated in the variety of external actors the Centre engages with; some efforts are focused on traditional academic research, like the two annual visiting Research Fellows, and other projects involve grassroots initiatives and opportunities in collaboration with NGOs and governments in Latin America (British Museum, 2023h). For example, in the recent *Untold Microcosms* project, published alongside the Hay Festival and Charco Press in 2022, SDCELAR curators collaborated with ten Latin American authors to choose objects from the British Museum's collection to inspire ten critically engaged short literary works. The stories use fiction and personal narrative in order to connect the collections and local communities, and open up discussion on colonialism, gender, and the representation of Indigenous cultures (Fuentes La Roche et al., 2022). The authors chosen reflect a diversity of thinkers, and importantly include authors also known for their political activism, like Yásnaya Elena Aguilar, a Mexican linguist and Ayuujk (Mixe) activist. The platforming of Indigenous voices through SDCELAR's collaborations combined with its engagement with decolonial discourse is promising, and has produced some incredibly interesting and innovative outputs so far.

However, its close connection to the British Museum itself may simultaneously produce other, if unintentional, consequences. SDCELAR's successes should be celebrated, but in doing so they may also prove beneficial for the western museum it is associated with. As part of the British Museum, any successful work by SDCELAR may lend legitimacy to the core institution. The Centre serves as evidence that helps the British Museum prove its own value, and "retain agency and status as the prime site for the legitimation of artistic and art historical discourses", as Caro Cocotle (2019) identifies in wider museological trends. It aligns with what Chwatal (2018) describes as a current "rebranding" of museums: away from "archives and taxonomies", and towards "discourse", "cross-disciplinary research" and "participation". The way in which SDCELAR is described on the British Museum's own website repeatedly employs similar sector-wide buzzwords, like "collaboration" and "community". It may also act as a defence for the British Museum, as they can counteract any criticism of their relationships with non-

European cultures through referring to the work of SDCELAR. On the British Museum's website, the Centre's achievements are all attributed under the label of "Our work", thus demonstrating how the core institution claims credit and in turn, legitimacy (British Museum, 2023h). In this way, some scholars remain sceptical even of more radical efforts made by institutions in collaboration with existing museum institutions. As Caro Cocotle (2019) identifies, as western institutions propose ways of "achieving" decoloniality, they in fact propose themselves as the way of achieving decolonisation. Then, the western museum once again just reaffirms its own position as authoritative tastemaker, expert, and leader; the same colonialist role that decoloniality actually tries to disrupt. In this way, through the Santo Domingo Centre, the British Museum is able to reposition itself as an authoritative voice once again, through an attempt to prove its value as a cultural heritage institution as a co-producer of SDCELAR's innovative work. Yet, little of the work carried out by SDCELAR seems to feed back into the core institution's processes; as demonstrated in Chapter 1, the Mexico Gallery remains untouched, unchanged, and unaffected by SDCELAR's work so far.

Museos comunitarios

Los museos comunitarios, or community museums, are an alternative museography founded in Mexico. As smaller, local organisations, "created for and by the community itself", their coexistence alongside larger institutions aims to offer a distinct model for the care of cultural heritage in the region, as a complementary addition to INAH's landscape of Mexican museology, alongside larger national museums like the MNA (Red de Museos Comunitarios de América, 2020).

Whilst adopted in some neighbouring countries, the original Oaxacan model remains the most oft-cited and thoroughly researched example of the trend. Influenced by the wider New Museology movement and ecomuseum trend of the 1970s, *museos comunitarios* offer a localised physical site for communities to display and view local cultural heritage, through its own forms of organisation. These individual institutions are self-governed but founded and regulated by the Mexican governmental body INAH, the same governmental body responsible for the Museo Nacional de Antropología, but are not directly tied to the larger, national museum in the same way as SDCELAR and the British Museum. This model was developed by INAH, led by Camarena and Morales and later developed into a larger program which created 94 community

museums across 17 states. The *museos* formed a response by governmental bodies to calls for decentralisation of the bureaucratic nature of cultural policy and control, which reached an apogee after the opening of the Museo Nacional de Antropología and criticism of its indigenist positioning, as explored in Chapter 2. Through *museos comunitarios*, local community groups were able to reclaim possession of their own cultural heritage, which previously faced a lack of control over, and often an entire loss of, items found in their region., as resources, repositories and decision-making were concentrated in Ciudad de México.

These *museos comunitarios* offer a more regional and participatory approach to the care of cultural heritage. The involvement of local people as agents in decision-making has led to the possibility of different curatorial narratives, emerging from the communities themselves. In her study of Oaxacan examples, Prados Torreira (2021, p.580) identifies one major benefit that it gives communities themselves the opportunity to tell their own stories, and create narratives that do not have to coincide with “the official history”. For example, she demonstrates how community curated exhibitions are able to allow narratives that "link past, present and future" (2021, p.580). The incorporation of references to contemporary lived experiences of Indigenous groups disrupts the atemporal myth presented in larger state museums, as discussed in earlier chapters. Thus, it is evident that these smaller museum sites are able to challenge dominant "national" narratives presented by the MNA in their displays, through forms of curatorial self-representation.

Simultaneously, it must be recognised that this participation and self-representation at the level of decision-making does not necessarily always equate to less hegemonic narratives. In her article, Prados Torreira (2021) also critiques the *museos comunitarios* from a feminist perspective, and highlights how existing gender dynamics in wider Mexican society may impact the curation of exhibitions at a local level. For example, she proposes that there has been an insufficient incorporation of women in their creation and management thus far (2021, p.581). Indeed, as Pérez Ruiz (2008, pp.102-3) identifies in her overview of this second wave of Mexican museology, whilst the community-focused model allows for a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, a participatory model does not necessarily result in counter-hegemonic narratives, as it may still reflect issues of societal differentiation present in Mexico today. For example, factors like social class, poverty, and as Prados Torreira alludes to, gender will limit the

extent to which community actors may be able to fully collaborate with localised projects. Furthermore, with the pervasive nature of neocolonialist thinking, it is also possible that participants may display similar thinking that is encouraged by institutions like the MNA, and reproduce indigenist narratives even in their own community-led exhibiting.

In this way, the *museos comunitarios* face similar challenges to SDCELAR in their association with INAH, the same body in charge of the MNA. Whilst they offer a distinct, community-owned and self-directed physical space, they are still bound up in existing power dynamics with the cultural heritage sphere in Mexico, which has been demonstrated to fall prey to tendencies against Indigenous self-expression. Within INAH's top-down approach, discussed in earlier analysis of the MNA, local organisations may be considered less valuable than larger national museums. It is worth questioning to what extent the work of community museums is impacted by their place within this wider eco-system of Mexican museology. However, this is not to undermine the potential of *museos comunitarios* themselves, which have been alluded to by key decolonial thinker Mignolo as a promising suggestion for decolonial museum theory moving forward (Duncan, 2021).

The Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence in Latin American Research and the Mexican *museos comunitarios* are highlighted here as two of the most disruptive and radical efforts that have emerged from the original institutions of the British Museum in the UK, and INAH in Mexico. Both consider alternative and experimental means of allowing people to engage with and use collections and objects of Prehispanic cultural heritage. However, the impact of their association with the larger, and more powerful, institutions discussed may provide a barrier to their own agency and ability to offer a decolonial alternative.

Abolition

In the context of scepticism of the above adaptive and additive approaches, it is worth acknowledging within this framework of understanding that some thinkers do not believe the museum can be decolonised at all. Thus, this third section serves to recognise the more radical conceptualisation of one potential future of both museums: a future without them.

Instead, some thinkers pose that the only potential alternative to a current, colonialist museology is to destroy the museum institution as it is; or, in the words of Caro Cocotle (2019), “to burn the museum down to the ground”. For some, the conception of the western museum in the context of colonialism and imperialist rule means they have never been, and perhaps never will be, more than "tools" of colonisation and celebration of colonial rule (Minott, 2019, p.561; Sentance, 2018). In this view, supporting and perpetuating the colonialist framework is understood as the museum’s primary function, and thus institutions like the British Museum are inherently colonialist endeavours; they have no use nor role as institutions beyond reproducing coloniality.

Within this view there is a strong sense of scepticism about efforts made by museums in the so-called "decolonial turn", which has seen more efforts made by those working “inside the marble pillars” to incorporate ideas proposed by decolonial thinkers (Muñiz Reed, 2016, p.16-7). Many decolonial scholars are sceptical of the museum’s capacity to engage with decolonial theory, or ever truly decolonise. As Brulon Soares (2019, p.10) asks: if museums were originated as European political institutions, can they be used to give voice to minority groups in the former colonies?

This leads to two conclusions: the museum of the past cannot continue, as a colonial institution, and the museum of the present cannot overcome the extensive influence of this colonial history to become anything beyond a colonialist centre of knowledge production. This leads us to consider, what would happen if the British Museum, or the MNA, were actually dismantled? Perhaps the most common response to calls for abolition - what would happen to the material in collections? Where would objects go? Whilst this is often coupled with a tone of panic and concern about loss or damage, it could also allow for increased use of individual items, facilitate opportunities for alternative approaches of care, or create local centres for community access, similar to the *museos comunitarios* model.

There are myriad possible implications of abolishing state museums, and speculative discourse around what this might look like could form a dedicated project in itself. However, it is one potential path forward and one called for by multiple scholars, thinkers and activists. Thus, one consideration for the alternative approaches for the museum of the future has to address the argument for abolition, as some would argue that the only way forward to stop each institution

perpetuating colonial, or neocolonial, narratives, ideals, and thought would be to the end the existence of the British Museum and the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Interventions

Finally, this framework would like to introduce another angle to conversations of potential futures, and indeed functions of the two state museums; that is, their uses outside of their own institutional agendas and directives. There has been discussion throughout this dissertation about what the British Museum and Museo Nacional de Antropología consider their own function to be, and critical engagement with how they might align with colonialist ends and actions through their existence. However, it is also vital to recognise how outside agents, including visitors, use the museum for their own purposes, and how members of the public utilise the museum site as a stage for various subversive strategies that act as interventions to the museums' own agenda.

Education

One of the museum's own aims is a didactic function. This has been identified through analysis of the two examples in earlier chapters, and seen in the dissemination of hegemonic, colonialist narratives of Eurocentrism and *indigenismo*. However, the provision supplied by the national museum may also offer a point of entry for further educational efforts outside of its own projects, that encourage critical engagement with the museum itself and the cultural heritage on display.

One such organisation in the UK is Mexicolore, an artefact-based teaching team made up of Graciela Sánchez and Ian Mursell. Their core mission is as educators, delivering engaging teaching sessions to children in primary schools, having delivered some 2000 lessons in the past four decades (Mexicolore, 2023). Mexicolore have also previously worked with the British Museum, and other similar organisations, to offer interactive experiences and workshops about Mexican and Mesoamerican cultures. Though Mexicolore is still active and continues to deliver educational engagement activities, they have not been included as part of the Museum's

programming for some time (which may also raise questions around the British Museum's current approach to programming and their in-house educational engagement). In a firsthand interview with Mursell and Sánchez (2023) conducted for this project, they reveal an insight into educational visits to the Mexico Room itself with younger visitors (and the challenges posed by objects that they cannot touch, with distracting lintel alarms as discussed in Chapter 1). In response to the lack of participation and hands-on experiences offered by museums like the British Museum itself, Mexicolore have developed methods of engagement that help children to learn through alternative means. In the Museum of Mankind (which closed in 1997 before being reorganised as the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the British Museum), Mexicolore offered an immersive introduction to Mexican culture alongside one major exhibition, in which children could visit a simulated Mexican market before entering the exhibit. Within this, they were encouraged to dress up, play instruments, taste food; tactile experiences that appealed to all senses. As referred to in the first chapter, in an interview Sánchez uses the example of the metate, a corn-grinding stone used in both Prehispanic society and Mexican communities today, in particular; arguing that the action, sound, and use of an object helps the children she works with invoke a connection to the daily lived realities of Indigenous Mexican people (Mursell and Sánchez, 2023). Indeed, this object is one she herself has seen in use, as opposed to as an artefact in a purely historical context. In this way, they believe their approach offers an opportunity for people to build a personal connection with the cultures they are studying, and thus challenge and undermine any preconceptions or stereotypes they might otherwise encounter. Similar engagement-orientated efforts have been considered by scholars. Chwatal (2018) demonstrates how the format, especially one focused on personal experience, may seek to resist the colonialist narrative, or Othering, by "humanizing" the individuals represented by the objects on view in an exhibition. However, he also warns that a subjective approach may make a total view of world history unavailable, as "everyday narratives and individual or small group, on-site experiences are favoured in place of global historical patterns" (2018). This could also be the strength of such an intervention, though, as such individual and personal engagement brings the source communities closer to the participant, challenging stereotypes of a homogenised Indigeneity and nullifying any mystification or exoticising myths of "far-away" lands that the museum narrative is often at fault of encouraging, as seen in earlier analysis of the Mexico Gallery in the first chapter of this thesis. Whether these educational

interventions are seen as complementary or contradictory to the museums own agenda is open to further debate, but it illustrates one way in which the museum site might offer alternative uses for the public audience.

Protest

Other forms of awareness- or consciousness-raising besides education also arise in the museum. A further alternative use of the museum site is proposed by activists, who subvert the institution's proposed function for visitors and instead transform it into a site of protest.

At the Museo Nacional de Antropología, activists have called into question what the museum permits as the proposed relationship between Prehispanic cultural heritage objects and audiences. On March 31st 2022, artist and activist Pepx Romero entered the Museo Nacional de Antropología, and proceeded to kiss and lick around 30 pre-Hispanic objects on display. This piece of protest and performance art, later titled "Mexique 2022", was documented in video. This recording was posted online, with a commentary intended to draw attention to multiple auctions of pre-Hispanic objects held in France over the last few years. In an interview with online independent publication Hyperallergic (Velie, 2022), Romero explains that "the action of kissing and licking the objects shows that the pre-Hispanic objects are objects of desire in the context of auctions in France". This act was castigated by the Museo. Diego Prieto Hernández, director del INAH, declared it a "violation of the behaviour protocol inside the museum" (El Universal, 2022). Indeed, the protest piece proved provocative in the press and popular discourse, raising concern over potential damage to the objects in the MNA. Romero was not charged with any criminal offence, as little lasting damage was caused. But as one insight posted alongside the video's dissemination on social media urges us to question, to what extent does the discomfort of viewing this unexpected interaction, and concern caused by the potential of damage done by the artist, compare to the relatively minimal outrage over auctions of similar cultural heritage items abroad (Obras de Arte Comentadas, 2022)? Thus, the artist is able to subvert the expected role of the museum, as a protector and preserver of the care and conservation of cultural heritage, as well as the expected behaviour of its visitors. Or, that is, of the assumed "serious" or intellectual

visitor, as analysed in the second chapter of this thesis. In doing so, Romero is able to bring contemporary narratives into the space, transforming a typically passive space into an active site of conversation that calls to the fore pressing topics of repatriation and care of cultural heritage. Through his subversion of the Museo's intended and expected use as a museum, this activist intervention was able to propose an alternative, political potential within the museum site, which otherwise takes a neutral, pacified stance, as outlined in Chapters 1 and 2.





Figures 18, 19 and 20: Stills from multimedia artwork *Mexique 2022* by Pepx Romero (2022).

At the British Museum, protests have more explicitly criticised the institution itself. One longstanding controversy is the Museum's partnership with financial backer BP, as outlined in Chapter 1. Environmental activists have campaigned against the fossil fuel sponsorship. Most

prominently, groups focused on ending oil sponsorship of the arts like Culture Unstained and BP or not BP? have staged a series of high-profile protests within the museum site. BP or not BP? have been performing "guerilla theatre" interventions at the museum since 2012. In 2015, the group joined with the London-Mexico Solidarity group to protest the "Day of the Dead" festival hosted by the British Museum, and co-sponsored by BP and the Mexican Government, as part of the Dual Year of UK and Mexico. Without prior permission from the Museum, on October 30th, they staged an interactive protest-performance to interrupt the event. Six characters in painted sugar skull makeup, representing agents involved in "dirty deals" facilitated by the museum, roamed the event, whilst others creating a "living shrine" to celebrate the Mexican communities who are "fighting back against destructive oil projects and state repression" (BP or not BP?, 2015). The topic of climate change that they protest highlights wider themes of the importance of ecological and environmental considerations in conversations about decolonising, which often have a disproportionate impact on Indigenous communities. For example, as group member Jess Worth (2015) outlines, this protest intended to highlight impacts on Mexican communities and ecosystems caused by recent developments at the time, including concern at the privatization of Mexico's oil and gas sector, upcoming bids to for the lease to extractive drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, and previous environmental catastrophes caused by BP in the region such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Through the group's unsanctioned use of the museum site, they were able to spread awareness of these issues to the large-scale event's attendees, and through further coverage in the press.



Figures 21 and 22: Performance and protest at the Day of the Dead event (BP or not BP?, 2015).

In both these protest/performances, members of the public use the museum, not as it is intended, but in interventions that subvert the space for their own purposes. They facilitate consciousness-raising about current and pressing issues facing Indigenous peoples today, bringing contemporaneity to the forefront around topics of cultural heritage or climate change. In this way, they bring active action to what is often otherwise considered a passive site that often intends to pacify narratives and quell political and Indigenous action. As a public institution, the public is to an extent "invited" into this site, but both actions subvert the expected behaviour of visitors to highlight alternative uses of the museum besides what it outlines as the typical audience experience. As the example of educational engagement shows, this use by the external public can fall on a scale from complementary to contradictory in relation to the core institution, but it mainly demonstrates how the museum might be used as a public institution beyond its own agendas, even simply as a physical site for the public to gather, as a third place, and reclaim to use for their own means.

Conclusions

To conclude, this chapter has offered a framework for understanding potential alternative approaches the museum might take. Concentrated on the British Museum and Museo Nacional de Antropología, this framework recognises current plans and potential future changes to the institutions, to the extent it is possible to hypothesise from the information released at the time of research.

"Adaptation" traces the institutional reaction to contemporary museological trends and movements that call on the museum to change. This is most clear in the British Museum's planned re-display under the Rosetta Project, as well as a turn towards digital methodologies adopted by both museums. As these museums attempt to adapt to the changing cultural landscape, decolonial thinkers remain sceptical of the profundity of their commitment to change.

"Addition" analyses two examples of offshoot projects related to, but considered somewhat distinct from, the core institutions. The Santo Domingo Centre in the UK and the *museos comunitarios* of Mexico offer more radical interpretations of cultural heritage and

alternative methods of curation and care, but their agency to engage with decoloniality is challenged by their positionality under the same organisations as the British Museum and MNA. Hence, "Abolition" recognises proposals that consider any alternative, decolonial futures of the museum to be unattainable, instead calling for destruction of the entire institution.

However, "Interventions" considers how the museum site may be used by external agents beyond its own self-defined aims. This section offers two examples of alternative uses of the site proposed by intervening members of the public. One through education, admittedly more sanctioned by the institutions, and others through protest without permission from the MNA and British Museum. Both illustrate how the museum as a site may be used by the public beyond the institution's own directives for audiences.

Whilst there is not the scope for sustained evaluative analysis of each part of this framework within this project, it has identified various examples which aim to serve as starting points of interest for further research. It is clear there is still further debate to be had about the best way forward, and as this study is unable to encompass every development in both institutions, it cannot offer a definitive evaluation of which approach may be considered the most acceptable or appropriate.

Instead, the above categories – adaptation, addition, abolition, and interventions – intend to illustrate the diversity of thought, and sometimes the tension of conflict, within the decolonial movement itself. Proposals about decolonising the museum fall on a spectrum from radical to reformist. In this way, we can see there is not one simple solution that museums may employ to “achieve” decolonisation. Rather, decolonising is an active process, in which institutions will need to remain engaged and continually challenging themselves. With this framework, it is hoped future research will be more able to monitor and continue to evaluate such changes, to hold these, and similar institutions, accountable.

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis has set out to analyse the exhibition of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico in museums, using the examples of permanent displays in the British Museum and Museo Nacional de Antropología to situate the specific examples from the United Kingdom and Mexico within the wider museological trends in the context of decolonising the museum. This study expected to find differences between the two institutions, as illustrative of differing national museologies. Whilst there are clear differences, this thesis has also uncovered the extent of colonialist influence across both museums today.

Through exploration of these two examples, this project has demonstrated that the legacy of colonial histories persists in the state museum as an institution, as frameworks of colonialist logic are demonstrated to be persistent and pervasive in both the British Museum and the MNA. Within analysis of their permanent displays, the curation and interpretation of Prehispanic cultural heritage is demonstrated to be biased, albeit to serve two differing ideologies of Eurocentrism and *indigenismo* respectively. This is evidenced through each museums' fidelity to Eurocentric values, their curation of the permanent exhibition spaces, and their reception by audiences. Therefore, it is concluded that both permanent displays of Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico considered in this thesis do cause harm for already marginalised communities in their representations of Indigeneity, through their production, dissemination, and perpetuation of colonialist frameworks of thought. Subsequently, in response to the central research question, whilst it is evident both British and Mexican state museums do differ in their approaches to the exhibition of Prehispanic cultural heritage, what is most prominent is the similarities between the two, as this research unveils how the Mexican state museum replicates colonialist frameworks first established in Europe, in institutions like the British Museum.

The above issues highlighted by this research proves that there is still a need for these institutions to decolonise. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the process of decolonising exhibitions of Prehispanic cultural heritage will be much more complex than simply replicating Mexican examples of curation and interpretation. Therefore, the final chapter considers upcoming changes and challenges to the conclusions drawn in this thesis about the permanent displays and identifies potential futures of both the British Museum and Museo Nacional de

Antropología. The scope of such developments is understood within a framework developed for this project: adaptation, addition, abolition, and interventions. That is, this framework traces changes within, alongside, without, and subversive of the existing institutions.

Yet, amidst calls to decolonise, neither state museum offers a rapid or substantive response to demands to change their practice or institutional processes. In fact, their permanent displays are marked as representative examples of their reticence to radical change. Untouched for decades, their representations of Indigenous cultural heritage, and therefore Indigenous communities, in Mexico are outdated and can be seen as offensive. Changes must be made with urgency as to counter the myths and stereotypes of Indigeneity they presently disseminate to millions of visitors each year, as each national museums' current approach to exhibiting Indigenous cultural heritage from Mexico lacks nuance, sensitivity and instead may contribute to the ongoing subjugation of Indigenous peoples in Mexico and beyond.

However, we must also remain sceptical of such changes and continue to monitor, measure, and evaluate proposals by both museums. Calls upon the museum must not rest until changes are made concrete, at the risk of bureaucracy being employed as a tactic to delay enacting institutional change. Whilst projects like the Rosetta masterplan are obviously large, complex undertakings, the fact is they make no impact until material changes are put into place. Otherwise, they risk being no more than empty promises that repair the Museum's reputation whilst requiring no more than shallow engagement with decolonial theory. Instead, it is again fundamental to outline the necessity for museums to recognise that decolonising is an active verb; it is not something that can be "achieved" but rather an ongoing process, and continual commitment to self-critical change.

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