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ARTICLE

(De)colonization of European museums: Five minimum standards for reenergizing postcolonial practices

Matilde Dani

EUI, Fiesole, Italy
Email: matilde.dani@eui.eu

Abstract

A museum should be a place where cultures, dialogue, and social relations are enhanced. Given the renewed public interest in the topic, the author poses the question: Is there a need and a possibility to decolonize ethnographic museums? Should we have common and shared practices? In an attempt to eliminate colonial vestiges in museums, an analysis of literature and practices leads the author to analyze five European ethnographic museums in order to understand their merits and shortcomings. The subjectivity of these institutions and the diversity with which colonization can be presented makes the proposal of a single generalized solution not preferable. An objective analysis, based on actions and variables, drives the author to determine, however, that in order to revitalize museum practices, there is a need to create a sharable framework. The design of minimum standards can help museums set clear and measurable goals to achieve a higher level of decolonization.

Keywords: ethnography; museum; decolonization; standards; goals; interview; Europe

Introduction: The vestiges of Western imperialism today

The enduring remnants of nineteenth-century Western imperialist ambitions linger in our present context and within the institutions that shape our lives. While the colonial expansions of the past involved conquests, slavery, and massacres,[1] they also wove a social fabric steeped in those values. Contemporary theorists argue that colonization persists in subtler forms,[2] even after global governance supposedly ended it post–World War II, giving rise to a form of subjugation characterized by domination without hegemony.[3] The way cultures perceive each other has been profoundly shaped by colonizing intent. Western, and particularly European, society has imposed values, beliefs, and standards on others, and these legacies are still present today. Of the various aspects that affect colonization, that of cultural domination[4] is the one that is most detectable today

[1] Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht 2022.
[2] Macdonald 2022.
[3] Guha 1997.
[4] Hall 2016; Dai-Rong Wu 2006.

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and has become relevant again in public debate thanks to movements such as Black Lives Matter[5] and Rhodes Must Fall.[6]

Criticism against all institutions created by the Westphalian system is disruptive. In particular, however, the focus is on those institutions that were created in a functional way to achieve soft power and that still remain attached to their colonial roots: museums.[7] As we know, a museum in fact "is a highly political institution, often involved or implicated in international relations, and an expert on power."[8] Museums' politicization reached its peak with the creation of ethnographic museums, designed to display artefacts from the colonies, highlighting differences and inferiorities of other subjugated populations.[9] Museums are thus read as heirs to cultural colonialism, continuing to aspire to the achievement of their mission of "selling nations[10]."

Movements advocating for decolonization have evolved over time, gaining prominence in contemporary discourse.[11] In particular, the political use of museum spaces started to become a problem as they are institutions structured on the illusion of being able to catalogue the world, enclosing it in sections, in captions that aim to subjugate non-Western cultures as "inferior[12]." Following the decolonial wave, since the end of the twentiethth century new critical discourses have begun to identify museums as formations of hegemonic knowledge.[13] These problematic issues have forced and given these institutions the opportunity to reinvent themselves.[14]

Some European ethnographic museums, such as the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden or the Weltmuseum in Vienna, have acknowledged their responsibility and adopted decolonial approaches, attempting to put an end to or limit harmful practices.[15] These attempts have been varied, museums have been opened, globalized, mobilized, unlearned, repaired, and reset.[16] In the 1990s,[17] this process began, aiming to transform museums from perceived ivory towers into institutions capable of involving diverse social actors.[18,19] With the push from the United States and postcolonial movements, the work of museums began to change in response to the demand for greater social responsibility toward pressing contemporary issues.[20] Today's society has demonstrated, driven by protests and demands, that it insists on addressing cultural heritage as a tool of Western cultural hegemony.[21] This critical stance encompasses not only anticolonial perspectives but also antiracist and feminist viewpoints, reflecting a broader societal fabric.[22]

[5] For further information: https://blacklivesmatter.com

[6] For further information: https://harvardpolitics.com/rhodes-must-fall/; https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/rhodesmustfall-how-a-decolonial-student-movement-in-the-global-south-inspired-epistemic-disobedience-at-the-university-of-oxford/D57EF638347B43E9B2041BF46E0E1154

[7] Decker 2016; Nye 2004.

[8] Sylvester 2008.

[9] Barranco, Frances L. 2022; Fromm 2016; Hammersley 2006.

[10] Wu 2006; Wallis 1994.

[11] Interviewee N° 6 2023; Huff 2022.

[12] Cohen, Torshizi, Zamindar 2023.

[13] Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht 2022.

[14] Interviewee N° 9 2023; Thomas 2019.

[15] Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 7 2023.

[16] Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht, 2022; Savoy, Sarr 2018.

[17] Interviewee N° 3 2022; Huff 2022.

[18] Porciani 2017.

[19] Carta 2021.

[20] Carter, Orange 2012.

[21] Guermandi 2021; Mallard, Eggel, and Galvin 2021

[22] Festa 2022.

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Looking therefore at the needs demanded by today's society, the author chose to focus on the question: "Is there a need and a possibility to decolonize ethnographic museums? Should we have common and shared practices?" The exploration begins with the desire to show how museums are Occidental institutions, trying to detect how imperial ideology and colonial practices have been naturalised in today's museums, thus continuing to preserve and (re)construct cultural, social, political, economic, and aesthetic hierarchies. The focus will be on ethnographic museums in particular, and how their conception is still closely linked to colonial legacies. In order to carry out a comparative analysis, the author has chosen to look in particular at European ethnographic museums. These, in fact, are the biggest receptacles of criticism of postcolonial movements, and this is why the author felt there was a need to examine their work. If advances in the process of decolonization of museum institutions have been seen, they have been slow and difficult. Above all this development, according to the author, has been poorly evaluated.

After demonstrating the connection between colonization and museums, drawing on the concepts introduced by the "new museology," the author develops an analysis of five major European ethnographic institutes: Ilaria Alpi Italo-African Museum (Rome); Weltmuseum (Wien); Royal Museum of Central Africa (Tervuren); Linden Museum (Stuttgart); and Quai Branly (Paris). Through the analysis of these five museums, the author will attempt to highlight which practices are most widely used and what criticisms have been made of them. This analysis is carried out through the use of five variables in order to meet the need for a more methodical and objective study of practices. The parameters are based on the book of Ariese and Wróblewska[23]: visibility, inclusivity, decentering, education, and transparency. Under each of them, actions with decolonial purposes will then serve as objective parameters to assess to what extent European ethnographic museums can be said to be decolonized, so as to understand what might be needed to achieve improvements in the field. In order to study the work of these institutions, the author will make use of the knowledge of the staff of some European ethnographic museums through anonymized interviews. The author conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with senior staff of European ethnographic museums and experts in museology and decolonization. These provided a clear and systematic understanding of the merits and shortcomings of the practices employed, as well as an inside view of these institutions. Investigative and informal interviews were also associated with these, which helped the author to shape the research more precisely.

Conducting the interviews revealed in a disruptive way how decolonization requires a subjective approach given its complexity. Problems of, for example, government, space, and funding make it difficult to have the same, all-encompassing approach in every institute. The author, referring to the literature and how the most important developments in the field have unfolded, believes there is a need to create a common frame. Given the subjectivity of museums, it has emerged that there may be actions that are cost-effective that could be implemented in order to be able to say that a museum has started its decolonization process. The author created so-called "five minimum standards," which emerged from dialogues with museum staff members. In her opinion, these five practices are intended to serve as a basic and minimal guide, potentially helping museums to set clear and measurable goals for decolonization and at the same time being a guide for visitors in being judges of the museums' performance. By creating minimum standards, applicable in almost all museum contexts, museums themselves can be held accountable for their actions and progress in decolonization. The author claims that the creation of a solid base could also promote collaborative projects between museums, providing a shared frame of reference.

[23] Ariese Wróblewska 2022.

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As complex and varied as colonization can be within museums, and in particular in European ethnographic museums, the author believes that there is space and thus possibilities for a decolonial approach. The five variables serve as a method for revitalizing the methods used to date. The creation of a shared framework, such as minimum standards, in the author's opinion leads all museums to want to work together to advance and innovate existing practices.

The relevance of (de)colonization to ethnographic museums

Insight terminology

In order to comprehend whether ethnographic museums need to be decolonized, an understanding of what these two terms imply and mean is necessary.

Historically, colonial expansions manifested through conquest, enslavement, and violence, but colonialism itself is an enduring practice of dominance—politically, economically, and culturally—where one group subjugates another.[24] When discussing it in this study, reference is made to the European imperialist project that emerged when Europe's process of settlement, violent dispossession, and political domination was initiated in the rest of the world, including the Americas, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia.[25] Walter Mignolo[26] suggests that colonization did not just exploit resources but fundamentally altered the knowledge systems of the colonized. Following this thought, the type of colonization of interest to this study is the cultural one that aims to annihilate, empty, and almost nullify a different heritage.[27] *Colonize* in this sense can thus be associated with the term *monopolize.* According to Nozza,[28] the monopolization of culture by the West is a phenomenon that has deep historical roots, with very complex social and cultural trajectories. It is both a phenomenon characterized by the centralization of external stimuli toward a single focal point, hence centripetal; and a phenomenon based on diffusion toward contexts different from one's own, hence centrifugal[29]. Olivier Marboeuf in "Décolonizons les arts!" points out that when talking about colonization, what is meant is reification and capitalization. Associating different cultures with the "'other'" leads to emptying its very work by enclosing it in a label that is anything but representative.[30]

Edward Said's Orientalism describes a structured set of concepts, assumptions, and discursive practices used to produce, interpret, and evaluate the knowledge of non--European peoples. Said represents a type of break with previous studies, drawing attention not to economic-political logics but to the relationship between knowledge and power. According to the theory, therefore, colonial and imperialist practices aimed at "knowing the Orient" were part of the very project of domination of those areas.[31] Orientalism can be seen as an attempt to extend the geographical and historical terrain of poststructuralist critique to Western epistemology.[32] Said gave three interpretations of Orientalism: a specific field of academic studies on the Middle East and Asia, which helps to define Europe and what lies outside of it; a practice of characterising Europe by drawing a contrasting image or idea, based on binary oppositions (e.g. rational/irrational, order/chaos); a way of exercising

[24] Kohn, Reddy 2017; Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht 2022.
[25] Kohn and Reddy 2022.
[26] Mignolo 2007.
[27] Loyrette 2018.
[28] Nozza 2021.
[29] Nozza 2021.
[30] Allain Bonilla 2019.
[31] Said 1979.
[32] Kohn and Reddy 2017.

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authority by organising and classifying knowledge of the East. Orientalism was used as the ideological basis for French and British colonial rule. And its assumptions are still used today. According to Said, the repetition of ideas, stereotypes, and approaches is how Orientalism sustains itself and its power. Spivak made a step forward with her critique of transparent subaltern discourse.[33] The problem, however, is that experience itself is constituted through representation, and by denying this the detection of the problem itself becomes even more problematic and does not erase it. Representation has not disappeared,[34] and this is possible because power is still present, especially in the forms of language and dialogue.[35] According to Chakrabarty's analysis,[36] this is made evident by the fact that European concepts are treated as universal, while the third world seems to be described as lacking, backward. Theorist Homi Bhabha, in this regard, argues that these practices of hierarchical separation and classification of cultures perpetuate linguistic and sociological reductionism. It shows the inability to see the world and cultures as a whole – to adopt intellectual hybridity.

So what does it mean to decolonize? Minot said it is a process of disrupting the power structures established by European colonialism, centered on property and profit.[37] In the context of this research, decolonizing art does not mean destroying, burning, or canceling colonial works. On the contrary: destroying, extirpating, demolishing, and burning cultural property was – historically speaking – exactly what the colonizers did.[38] Ted Loos[39] speaks of decolonization as a movement that "calls institutions to account for their role in the history of colonialism." Underlying this thinking is the idea that it is necessary to consider artworks made by Indigenous peoples as art, not as ethnographic material that provides a deeper look into a problematically exoticized "other." It is therefore evident how this is inextricably linked to identity politics: Who can inscribe whom? Decolonization wants to break the labeling process that has been practiced for centuries by the West. In terms of heritage, the decolonization of art consists of taking care of colonial works, studying them, understanding them in order to learn from them, to learn what colonialism really was.[40] For Mignolo,[41] decolonization challenges this monopolization by advocating for the recovery of Indigenous epistemologies and identities. Colonization, in his view, was not merely centripetal—bringing everything toward a European "center"—but also centrifugal, forcing cultural practices outward in forms disconnected from their origins.

The phenomenon of (de)colonization emerges within museums, institutions that until recently were associated with the concept of museum monopoly. Interpreted and seen as a declination of the art monopoly. At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, experts begin to talk of musealization: using spaces to show the public artefacts that could be manifestations of one's power.[42] Ethnographic museums are thus inscribed in the history of the formation of states, being characterized differently depending on the region they belong to.[43] If, in fact, in continents such as Africa and Oceania, they were seen as a means of contributing to the creation of national unity between different cultural and ethnic groups, in Western countries the ethnographic museum was a showcase in which

[33] Hidalgo 2016.
[34] Morris 2010.
[35] Hidalgo 2016.
[36] Chakrabarty 2000.
[37] Minott 2020.
[38] Hinder Cruz 2019.
[39] Loos 2018.
[40] Hinder Cruz 2019.
[41] Mignolo 2007.
[42] Nozza 2021; Britannica 2022.
[43] Fromm 2016; Britannica 2022.

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to display the culture of the other." According to Stanton,[44] ethnographic museums analyze different types of knowledge, which can be shared or segregated and which can follow different paths. Within them, collections become a means of communicating information, and they should have primacy. This was learned during the development of postcolonial thinking, which made possible to understand the obvious connection of exhibition techniques and the colonial approach.

A need for change started to be clear, and the new museology responded, trying to redesign museum spaces and their communicative methods in terms of their social and political role.[45] This implied reshaping conservation methods, the epistemological status of the artefacts on display, and the nature and purpose of museum research.[46] But also changing is the relationship museums have with people and populations, both internally and externally.[47] Thus, groups that have historically struggled more to be represented are opened up, and the visitor is given the role of controller of the museum's work.[48] Weil[49] argues that these redefinitions were only made possible by a shift in focus from objects to ideas. Therefore, if we adopt a decolonial mindset, the museum instead of being a mere place of exhibition becomes a place where culture, dialogue, and redefining social relations can be enhanced.[50]

Along with a shift in the literature, there was also an attempt to change at the institutional level. The International Committee for Museology, in fact, started a process of redefining the museum itself, trying to adopt a postcolonial and all-inclusive approach.

The terminological, theoretical, and practical transformation of museum spaces, however, remains fraught with difficulties and obstacles that stem from the colonial legacy of museums and remain an integral part of them.[51] The theory of museology produced in the last half century has proven to be marked by paradigms created within colonial power structures because it is culturally grounded and politically engaged.[52] To image a postcolonial museum, it seems necessary to describe its colonial modalities and to seek a postcolonial impulse by allowing a cohabitation of ideas from different cultures.[53] By embracing the intellectual hybridity that Homi Bhabha calls for, museums can become spaces of cultural dialogue and redefine the ways in which societies remember, represent, and understand history.[54]

In order to understand how theory has spilled over into practice, in particular how the postcolonial approach has influenced the work of ethnographic museums, the author wants to carry out an objective study of practices. In order to do so, five European ethnographic museums will be analyzed in comparison in order to see the steps forward and the problems that can be detected.

Glance into European museums: How decolonization is done

Museum colonization is increasingly recognized as a problem that needs to be tackled across the globe, particularly in the West. This thesis focuses on the European area because of its

[44] Stanton 2011.
[45] Desvallées and Mairesse 2010.
[46] Desvallées and Mairesse 2010; McCall and Gray 2014.
[47] Stam 1993.
[48] Stam 1993; McCall and Gray 2014.
[49] Schmiegel 1990.
[50] Harrison 1994; Martineau 2014.
[51] Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht 2022; Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 15 2023.
[52] Brulon Soares 2021.
[53] Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht 2022.
[54] Nasrullah 2016.

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direct relevance. Being the first museums designed by colonial values, they are the first subjects of criticism in the postcolonial movement. Therefore, analyzing the practices they put in place can help to understand the state of the art and lead to greater evolutions in the field not only in the European region but worldwide. In fact, advancing the decolonization agenda in these institutions helps address the historical social injustices represented by museums at their foundation in colonial times. It would also allow challenging Eurocentric biases, fostering cultural exchange, and promoting greater equity and justice in the world.

The evolution of decolonization practices

The decolonization movement has been evolving since the end of the twentieth century. The first activists (e.g., Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Uche Okeke) and museums to get involved in the decolonization movement were mainly Indigenous peoples, artists, and scholars who questioned the representation and interpretation of their cultures and histories in museums[55] (e.g., the National Museum of the American Indian,[56],= Pitt Rivers Museum,[57] and Tropenmuseum[58]). Museum colonization is multifaceted, which makes it complex to identify a single problem or a homogeneous solution that can be implemented. This is also why the status of decolonization varies in each country, depending on political interest, curator commitment, available funds, and many other external factors.[59] In order to try to draw a comprehensive map, the study focuses on the identification of five variables that can encompass the actions that can be implemented to decolonize a museum. These variables will make it possible to create a red thread in the analysis of European museum institutions by highlighting general trends, innovative examples, and failures. Outlining positive practices will allow the author to understand what steps might still be missing in European institutions and what needs to be changed. In this way, it will be seen whether, relying on the new museology, it is possible to redesign spaces and communication by changing the social and political role of these institutions.[60]

Analytical framework: Five key variables

This study uses Ariese and Wróblewska's *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*[61] as its guiding framework. The choice of this text is deliberate and reflects its value in offering a clear, practical methodology for decolonial practices in museum spaces. Unlike abstract theoretical texts, Ariese and Wróblewska's work stands out for its ability to bridge theory and practice by providing concrete examples from institutions around the globe. Their work encapsulates actionable steps and principles that museums can adapt to their unique contexts, making it an invaluable resource for understanding how decolonization can manifest in institutional settings.

The guide also aligns with the central aims of this study: to examine how European ethnographic museums confront their colonial legacies and implement decolonial actions. Given that museums are not homogenous entities, the text's emphasis on flexibility and adaptability allows for nuanced, context-specific analysis. Moreover, its integration of global examples highlights the interconnected nature of decoloniality and restitution

[55] Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 7 2023; Interviewee N° 9 2023.
[56] For further information: https://americanindian.si.edu/about
[57] For further information: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/about-us
[58] For further information: https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/about-tropenmuseum
[59] Interviewee N° 4 2023; Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 5 2023.
[60] Desvallées and Mairesse 2010.
[61] Ariese and Wróblewska 2022.

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efforts, providing a comparative lens that underscores the universality of these challenges while respecting local particularities.

By adopting Ariese and Wróblewska's framework, this research gains a structured foundation to evaluate European museums across five critical variables—visibility, inclusivity, decentering, education, and transparency. These variables, rooted in decolonial theory, enable a systematic comparison of practices while respecting the diversity of each institution's historical and political context.

The five variables[62] chosen are based on the aforementioned text,[63] broken down on the basis of interviews conducted within the staff of European ethnographic museums and looking at the ten principles that, according to the Museums Association,[64] should guide decolonial practices[65]:

1. **Visibility**: This is the way ethnographic institutions have represented and shown artefacts and objects belonging to non-Western populations.[66] Changing visibility means reconsidering the approach to the objects themselves.[67] The current, single narrative based on stereotypes and colonial behavior should be eliminated[68] in favor of a hybrid one, as Bhabha would say. These changes, according to the research, can take place through the transformation into a new institution or the use of temporary exhibitions and interventions on existing collections, perhaps with the help of critical views of external actors such as artists from source communities.
2. **Inclusivity**: Museums were conceived as closed spaces, "cabinets of curiosities,"[69] to which just experts and scholars could have access. The necessity today is then to make it public.[70]—that is, opening it up across the board: to the visitor, to criticism, to dialogue with the source community, and to an open recruitment process. Openness could also include using the source languages to describe the artefacts, thus generating an interlinguistic dialogue. Given the sensitivity of the subject, the literature highlights that this must be done taking care not to fall into tokenism. Creating a false sense of inclusivity would, in fact, perpetuate stereotypes and obscure systemic barriers to participation and representation within museums, thus failing in the intent of decolonization.[71]
3. **Decentering**: The power structure that Spivak identifies in society, have been replicated within museums,[72] especially in forms of language and dialogue.[73] Decentralization aim to deconstruct and proactively replace power hierarchies that reproduce colonial structures.[74] It requires a commitment to continuous learning, listening, and collaboration with local communities.[75] The first step in such an approach comes

[62] It should be borne in mind, however, that the variables are interrelated and some aspects may occur in more than one of them.

[63] Ariese, Wróblewska 2022

[64] For further information: https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonizing-museums/communicating-decolonization/#

[65] Museums Association 2023.

[66] Interviewee N° 9 2023; Nguyễn Vũ, Pietrasik 2024.

[67] Brulon Soares, Leshchenko 2018; Nguyễn Vũ, Pietrasik 2024.

[68] Interviewee N° 3 2022 Interviewee N° 4 2023; Interviewee N° 5 2023; Interviewee N° 8 2022.

[69] Macdonald 2022 a.

[70] Interviewee N° 4 2023; Interviewee N° 3 2022; Lamot 2023.

[71] Walker 2019.

[72] Bellanca 2021; Giacomelli 2022; Rivet 2020.

[73] Hidalgo 2016.

[74] Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019; Interviewee N° 7 2023.

[75] Interviewee N° 10 2023.

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from becoming aware of one's own privilege. In doing so, by collaborating and opening up to source communities, museums can become more inclusive, relevant, and meaningful to the communities they serve.[76] This would also reflect the achievement of the new definition released by International Council of Museums (ICOM) of what a museum is.[77]

4. **Education**: Museums are by nature cultural and educational centers. What is aimed at changing is to whom this education is directed; if it used to be a place for the learned, today it must be a place where everyone can learn. Museums should aim to give visitors the opportunity to learn about new cultures and to learn from them, their traditions, and their histories[78] (e.g., students from Tagai State College were able to reconnect with aspects of their heritage at the University of Cambridge[79]). This implies that the museum should not limit itself to exhibiting the artefacts that are present but must create moments and opportunities for education for the visitor and for the staff within it.[80] According to this, the museum experience should aim to be one of growth and education.
5. **Transparency**: The basis of museum exhibition is the collection of objects that form the existing displays. The way in which these artefacts are acquired is often unclear, just as there is little transparency on how the history of the objects is told. There must be a commitment on the side of museums to reconstruct the biography of the objects in their collections and be prepared to narrate it to the public.[81] In this sense, taking a stand on what were the old and wrong acquisition practices and deciding to move away from them is also extremely relevant, because it implies transparency about the colonial past.

These variables (see Figure 1 for a graphical representation) will help in analyzing the work of European ethnographic museums. According to the author, they allow for a more methodical approach and to compare and highlight practices in Europe. A common thread in this analysis is necessary given the diversity of each of the museums analyzed. As it is impossible to establish who is the best, especially since it is not a competition, it is necessary to have parameters to analyze their actions. This is bearing in mind that variations with respect to the actions highlighted are most likely attributable to the singularity of the museums. Each one has to find its own practice, the one that is best for its environment and society.[82] The author wishes to emphasize that a deliberate choice was made not to refer to the analyzed practices as "best practice." There are no objective parameters or classifications to be able to say which practices are best, which is why here we will limit ourselves to analyzing museum practices and the criticism reported on them. The five museums taken as case studies are among those that the author tried to contact and analyze. The choice of them was motivated primarily on the basis of the information available on them and the studies previously conducted. Differences in the interest and involvement of the country's political sphere in the decolonial debate were also taken into account. This is because the involvement or noninvolvement of the state can affect or promote museum decolonization, even if only in deciding the amount of funds allocated to the institutes. Finally, based on the

[76] Interviewee N° 10 2023; Interviewee N° 3 2022; Santhanam 2021; Schweitzer 2020.
[77] ICOM 2022, "ICOM approves a new museum definition."
[78] Interviewee N° 7 2023; Interviewee N° 8 2022.
[79] Edwards 2018.
[80] Interviewee N° 4 2023.
[81] Friberg and Huvila 2019; Interviewee N° 4 2023; Interviewee N° 5 2023; Interviewee N° 7 2023.
[82] Interviewee N° 4 2023.

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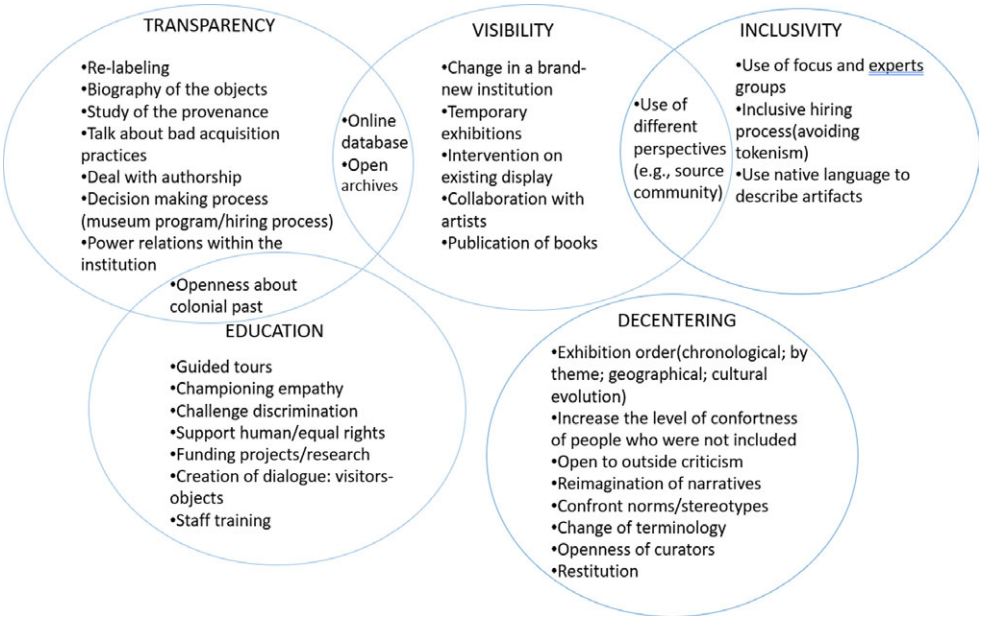


Figure 1. Graphical representation of five variables used by the author and their deconstruction into actions. This representation aims to help the reader to understand the overlaps between the variables and provide a summary of the actions that can be used to address each variable.

interviews and literature consulted, the author took into account their relevance as "lead museums" in the European decolonization project.

Ilaria Alpi Italo-African Museum, Italy

To pursue the guarantee of visibility within museums, the most efficient method would be to dismantle the institution and recreate it from scratch. The Italo-African Museum Ilaria Alpi[83] in Rome is trying to do this by rebuilding itself entirely. It was created for propaganda purposes and to promote Italian colonial exploits with collections from Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia.[84] The change started when the former Institute for Africa and the Orient became part of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage in 2018. The museum began a process of studying, inventorying, and paying attention to the collections and themes.[85] The basic intention is to place the history of the museum and colonialism in the broader context of relations between Italy, Europe, and Africa. This change, according to the curators, must take place through the creation of a new space. Renouncing a classical museum structure with a permanent collection, they want to work on temporary exhibitions that allow for the continuous recalibration of the museum's work.[86] The idea is that of a dynamic, open museum, a laboratory in transformation, with a permanent core designed to be updated and modified over time and spaces for temporary exhibitions and meetings, with a certain degree of indefiniteness and openness that allows the themes of the sections to be presented not as definitive and closed contents but as places of shared creation.[87] The museum's work

[83] Delpino 2023.
[84] Roma Sito Turistico Ufficiale 2021.
[85] Goethe Institute 2023.
[86] Grechi and Gravano 2020, Delpino 2023.
[87] Goethe Institute 2023, Roots Routes 2022.

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is therefore not only based on a complete overhaul of its spaces (e.g., Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Weltmuseum Wien have done the same), but it also envisages through the use of temporary exhibitions and collaborations with artists to give visibility to themes and populations that until now had not found space.[88]

As praiseworthy as the work carried out by the museum is, it is necessary to consider that it has received very special attention and opportunities compared to other ethnographic museums in Europe, with substantial funds and resources from the Italian government.[89] Moreover, its work is criticized primarily for its failure to acknowledge the history of Italian colonialism and the damage it caused, particularly in Ethiopia and Somalia. In addition, despite the stated aim of promoting dialogue between Italy and Africa, there seems to be a lack of diversity in staff and representation within the institution.

Weltmuseum Wien, Austria

The museum has an extensive collection of ethnographic objects and artefacts from Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Many of them were acquired during the period of European colonialism.[90] The Viennese Museum was under a four-year renovation before reopening in 2017, during which significant changes were made to the permanent collection and its public areas.[91] These transformations were notably inspired by the intervention of choreographer Claudia Bosse in 2015. Bosse reorganized the content of the galleries according to various themes, including colonialism and cultural protection, such as removing traditional showcases and eliminating the physical and symbolic distance between visitors and the objects (as was also done by the Museo delle Culture del Mondo, Carlo D'Albertis in Genova[92]).

The changes in the museum's narrative reflect a broader shift in ethnographic museums. For instance, the Weltmuseum Wien's transformation aligns with trends identified in its contemporaries such as the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. These institutions have embraced a more self-reflexive stance, rethinking the presentation of colonial collections to critique and move beyond the ordering principles imposed by Western frameworks.

The Weltmuseum's new narrative emphasizes interaction between viewers and objects, suggesting that ethnographic artifacts' histories are better understood through active engagement. The practice of intervening in the collections thus merged with two: the use of temporary exhibitions to raise important questions of debate or to reinterpret part of the collection, and the collaboration with artists to achieve a more multifaceted vision (e.g., Rajkamal Kahlon[93], "Stories of Traumatic Pasts" exhibition with various artists [2020–2021][94]). Bosse's intervention transformed galleries into performative spaces. As highlighted by Chwatal,[95] this shift indicates a recognition of the museum's role as an active agent in narrating colonial history rather than a passive repository of objects.

The museum has thus tried to detach itself from the ordering principles that Western museums and collections have imposed on the objects.[96] In this sense, Bosse, given its

[88] Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 7 2023.
[89] Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 7 2023.
[90] Weltmuseum Wien 2023.
[91] Weltmuseum Wien 2023.
[92] For more information: https://www.museidigenova.it/it/filosofia-espositiva
[93] For more information: https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/exhibitions/stayingwithtrouble/
[94] For further information: https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/exhibitions/stories-of-traumatic-pasts/
[95] Chwatal 2018.
[96] Chwatal 2018.

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origins, has been able to highlight the colonial legacy, but it is highly complex that she has been able to provide a revolutionary perspective on it. The practice of collaborating with artists, in fact, usually aims to gain an innovative, non-Eurocentric point of view by incorporating the points of view of authors and experts who have experienced the colonial approach in their own lives.[97] To use the viewpoint of a Western expert misses part of the decolonial effort in this sense. The endeavor seems to be more symbolic than leading to concrete decolonization, which is evidenced by a low collaborative engagement with Indigenous communities, preferring a Eurocentric approach.[98] In an attempt to improve this position, the museum has opened itself up to criticism in the construction of its exhibitions.[99]

Linden Museum, Germany

The Linden Museum is a museum of world cultures, which believes that all cultures are of equal value. It is a showcase of a collection of over 160,000 objects from all over the world: Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Many of these were acquired during the colonial era through various means, such as expeditions, trade, and colonial rule.[100] It presents the diversity of human cultures and encourages direct emotional and intellectual encounters with the original objects in the collections.[101] The Linden Museum has been preserving and acquiring everyday, ritual, and art objects since 1884. The collections focus on non-European contexts, and because of this, it has been working for about seven years to decolonize its collection by engaging in a process of critical reflection. This includes creating a dialogue with the communities whose cultural heritage is exhibited.[102] The embodiment of this effort is to reimagine it like a living museum, seeking to create spaces for dialogue and collaboration between the various communities, thus aiming to change the role of the museum in perpetuating practices of racism and colonialism.[103] In rethinking the structure, they focused mainly on three points: adopt a postcolonial perspective; involve local communities and communities of origin; and incorporate the present time, so it must be connected to the present day. A problem that emerges, however, in trying to create these collaborations comes from the choice of the collaborators themselves. How do we choose who can speak for these populations? How can long-lasting relationships be created? How to create institutional and not personal relationships?[104] For these reasons, making an exhibition means asking what is important, going through a negotiation process with communities, and building the display together with them. Trying to change their approach, they invested a lot in provenance studies.[105] This means that the structure of the exhibition is based not only on the biography but is intended to emphasize the beauty and the context of the object. This major reappraisal of their work and approach also stems from the many criticisms they have received. In fact, while they tried to open up the museum to different communities, they also ended up receiving a lot of bad reviews for the difficulty of accessing and understanding their exhibits. In particular, it seems that their choice of openness ended up becoming a way of exhibiting that was too complex for the average visitor to understand,

[97] Ariese and Wróblewska 2022.
[98] Augustat 2019; Augustat and Kapfhammer, 2017; Karydas et al. 2014.
[99] Chwatal 2018.
[100] Linden-Museum 2023a.
[101] Linden-Museum 2023b.
[102] Interviewee N° 7 2023; Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 4 2023.
[103] Linden-Museum 2023b.
[104] Interviewee N° 4 2023; Interviewee N° 3 2022.
[105] Linden-Museum 2023b; Gesa Grimme 2020.

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failing the creation of an external dialogue. Therefore, according to some experts, it is important to be clear about the direction desired and the changes this will imply in order to avoid external criticism.[106]

Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA), Belgium

Formed by artefacts collected during Belgium's colonial period in Central Africa, it is one of the largest repositories of Congolese and Central African art, history, and culture.[107] In 2013, the RMCA closed to renovate and revisit the museum's colonial contents and buildings.[108] It reopened in December 2018 with the aim of "presenting a contemporary and decolonized vision of Africa" through its galleries.[109] One of the practices used is the inclusion of multiple languages in the exhibition (Dutch, French, and English), so as to allow for wider inclusivity even though this is a Eurocentric and limited approach.[110] The establishment of a dialogue on the decolonial theme, on the other hand, is made possible through collaboration with communities in Central Africa. These have led to the creation of listening spaces in the galleries of the original languages.[111] "The mix of Central African and European languages spoken through films in the galleries serves as a reminder to visitors that the space is not limited to European understanding, enjoyment and interpretations of objects."[112] New spaces have been created within the museum, the Rotunda and Lieu de Memoire, which aim to address the issue of coloniality, but according to visitors they were not effective in their intent.[113]. This could therefore mean that the museum needs to work more systematically on increasing the comfort of populations that were previously not included. Trying to create the aforementioned dialogue can provide feedback on museums' actions. In addition, the RMCA has been criticized for its lack of non-Western representation, maintaining a focus on European explorers and missionaries.[114] For example, one of the interesting interventions was the gilded statue of a European missionary holding an African child, with a plaque reading: "Belgium brings civilization to Congo." This remained on display, but its historical context is explained through a cloth placed in front of the statue itself.[115] This, as well as some other performances, seemed more a means of glorifying colonialism without acknowledging its damage. Finally, further criticism was leveled at the failure to repatriate looted objects from central Africa in colonial times until 2022. The year in which the Belgian Parliament adopted the law that "recognises the alienable character of assets linked to the colonial past of the Belgian state and determines a legal framework for their restitution and return."[116]

[106] Interviewee N° 6 2023.
[107] RMCA 2023.
[108] RMCA n.d., "Origin of the collections."
[109] RMCA 2018; Thomas 2013.
[110] Van Bockhaven 2019; Interviewee N° 3, Interviewee N° 3 among ethnographic museum workers in Europe; Interviewee N° 1, Interviewee N° 1 among ethnographic museum workers in Europe, online, 16 November 2022.
[111] Valet Cédric, "Musée de Tervuren, Décolonisation impossible ?", 2018, https://medor.coop/magazines/medor-10-spring-2018/musee-de-tervuren/?full=1
[112] Donata Miller, "'Everything Passes, except the Past,'" *Science Museum Group Journal* 12, no. 12 (2019), https://doi.org/10.15180/191213.
[113] Miller.
[114] Van Bockhaven 2019; Interviewee N° 4 2023; Mayné 2020.
[115] Reuters 2018.
[116] RMCA 2022.

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Quai Branly, France

Quai Branly is one of the main symbols of French colonial ethnology, based on "itinerant, extensive and rapid cultural plundering,"[117] with a collection of over 300,000 artefacts from Africa and Oceania that was previously displayed at the Trocadero Museum of Ethnology.[118] The Parisian Museum is attempting to deal with its colonial past first by recognizing its heritage,[119] that is, by striving to recognize the ways in which colonialism has shaped its collections, its exhibitions, and the interpretation of what it contains.[120] The Musée du quai Branly uses the notion of the "metamorphosis" of museum objects to indicate status and new values, which have changed from ethnographic artefacts to artefacts.[121] They have worked on remaking the meaning of objects through visual and written media, trying to bring in a critical point of view to create a debate. Unfortunately, the message conveyed now of the object is perceived as "guided,"[122] thus risking the reimposition of the authority of the museum as sole interpreter, opening scarcely to new points of view. Nor should we forget that this ends up falling back on the assumption that we are the only society capable of creating a source of reliable knowledge, the only one that is capable of educating others, as Said's repetition of Orientalism claims. This criticism is corroborated by the discontent of Indigenous peoples who claim that it was built without consultation or input from the communities whose cultures are represented in its collections. Trying to work on other factors, the museum has worked in two directions to increase inclusivity: diversification of museum staff, trying to ensure that non-Western perspectives are represented inside the institution; and collaboration with non-Western communities to revise its collection. But what critics continue to argue is that Quai Branly's approach is still too narrow and that there is a need for a more decentralized and inclusive approach.

In line with French desire,[123] the museum also adopts the practice of restitution, and among the objects returned are, for example, 26 bronzes looted from Benin.[124] According to the museum, these returns took place in collaboration with non-Western communities and guided by principles of respect and cultural sensitivity.

These five cases show in an all-encompassing way how the five variables can be worked on differently and more or less efficiently. The author would say that a postcolonial approach can be found in each of them, or at least a tentative one. Their actions touch on different variables adopting various actions, and as shown by the critique, there is still room for improvement. The comparative study of these, as well as that of other museums, highlights how the subjectivity of the institution is significant and needs to be taken into account when adopting postcolonial practices. What is emphasized above all, however, is that every deliberate act that attempts to grapple with a museum's colonial past means decolonizing a museum.[125] The magnitude and extent of these actions depends on the needs and possibilities of the institutions. Given the low interest at the political level in Europe,[126] the most important aspect that needs to be found for the initiation of these practices is the

[117] Etongo, Evina, and Santores 2022.
[118] Westmoreland Bouchard 2009; Musée du quai Branly n.d.-a.
[119] Musée du quai Branly 2023.
[120] Thomas 2008; Thomas 2013; Musée du quai Branly n.d.-b.
[121] Dufrêne, Taylor 2012.
[122] Loumpet-Galitzine 2011.
[123] Savoy and Sarr 2018.
[124] Musée du Quai Branly 2018.
[125] Interviewee N° 9 2023.
[126] For further information on government spending on culture in the EU, please see: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_recreation,_culture_and_religion

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willingness of museums in dealing with their colonial past.[127] This can and is creating a movement of support for the decolonizing cause, following a snowball effect.[128] The practices adopted so far are only at an early stage, and because of the deepness of the colonial roots of the museum and the collections, some experts in the field are doubtful whether decolonization as an ultimate goal is possible.[129] We need to understand, despite differences within institutions, countries, and political interest, how to continue to progress and facilitate the adoption of colonial practices, especially trying to avoid relying on repatriation practices as the only ones; as highlighted in this text, the solution can comprehend many other actions.

The different singularities of museums do not, in the author's opinion, make it advisable to have a single solution method. What does seem desirable, however, is the creation of a sharable common framework that everyone should apply before being able to say they are decolonized. This can be developed as "minimum standards." In the next chapter, the author will try to use the literature and knowledge gained during the interviews to do so.

Revive decolonial approach by creating sharable standards

As shown by the examples, both the interviews and the literature indicate that it is extremely complex to find a univocal answer to the question, "What does it mean to decolonize a museum?" This is because of the variety of ways and means in which a museum can be said to be colonized.[130] The variables in particular show how the measures can range across different areas of museum work, from language to physical display.[131] But at the same time, they depend on factors such as staff and political interest, availability of funds and space, and so on. To speak of decolonizing the museum itself becomes almost absurd.[132] This is because the very concept upon which most of these museums were born is colonized at the grassroots. Museums, as Lynn Maranda points out, are Western constructs whose very existence poses one of the greatest impediments to true decolonization.[133] This could mean that to decolonize these structures is almost impossible. According to one of the interviewees, one cannot decolonize museums; one can make them anticolonial.[134] What does this mean? Decolonizing a museum expresses the willingness of "taking back" the harm that has been done. And here we encounter the paradox again, because how can you take back the damage that has already been done? It is impossible, as Miller wrote: "Everything passes except the past."[135] As Maranda notes, museums now find themselves caught in a dilemma, having to find new ways of realigning with the communities from which their collections originated. But this realignment often remains symbolic rather than structural, precisely because the foundations of the museum remain unchanged.[136]

The museum, as a white, Western institution, embodies values and practices—such as the preservation of intact collections and the authority to interpret cultural heritage—that are inherently colonial and resistant to transformation. Even efforts to make museums more inclusive of Indigenous and Black communities often stop short of addressing the deeper issue: the refusal to cede representational power. This brings the author toward the idea that

[127] Interviewee N° 2 2022; Interviewee N° 3 2023; Interviewee N° 5 2023; Interviewee N°12 2022.
[128] Interviewee N° 9 2023.
[129] Wali and Collins 2023; Interviewee N° 1 2022; Interviewee N°12, Interviewee N° 12 2022; Interviewee N° 9 2023.
[130] Mallard, Eggel, and Galvin 2021.
[131] Ariese and Wróblewska 2022.
[132] Kassim 2017.
[133] Maranda 2021.
[134] Interviewee N° 6 2023; Brulon Soares 2023.
[135] Miller 2019.
[136] Maranda 2021.

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what one would perhaps need is to completely deconstruct the concept of the museum in order to create a new type of structure, so as to eradicate the colonial foundations.[137] Whittington[138] suggests that community museums or cultural centers—such as the Uluru Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre in Australia—may offer more viable alternatives. These are spaces where traditional custodians have a say in how histories are told, and where interpretations are not filtered through a colonial lens. Unlike mainstream universal museums, which struggle to go beyond tokenistic inclusion, these centers allow for the reassertion of Indigenous authority and knowledge systems.

Thus, rather than attempting the impossible task of decolonizing an inherently colonial structure, the future may lie in the creation of radically different models—anticolonial, community-led, and epistemologically distinct from the institutions we now call museums. To truly embrace a radical approach would mean not simply reforming or adapting current institutions but dismantling them altogether. It would require the complete restitution of all looted and appropriated collections to the communities of origin—without conditions or delays. Moreover, it would involve material and symbolic reparations for the historical and ongoing harms caused by the museum apparatus itself: harms tied to erasure, misrepresentation, and the extraction of cultural wealth. In this vision, the very notion of the museum as a neutral space of knowledge is destabilized, replaced by frameworks that center justice, accountability, and the sovereignty of colonized peoples over their own cultural heritage.

Given the complexity of putting such a development into practice, an alternative is to focus on creating a set of minimum standards. The author takes into consideration the problems analyzed and discussed during the interviews and extrapolates that it seems necessary to understand how the decolonization process can begin. According to the interviewed museum staff, in addition to the lack of political interest, space, and time, there is a lack of analysis of these shortcomings themselves, which then eventually blocks the museums in their decolonizing intentions and justifies them in taking a step backward.

Minimum standards serve as a foundation for ensuring consistency and accountability, enabling museums to take initial steps toward decolonization without being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. By focusing on achievable actions, museums can collectively address critical issues such as language, representation, and stakeholder involvement. This collaborative effort reduces the risk of fragmentation and ensures that progress is made across multiple institutions simultaneously.

Moreover, sharing minimum standards fosters a culture of collaboration, allowing museums to learn from one another's successes and challenges. This approach helps to avoid relying solely on the debated practice of repatriation, instead promoting investments in education, inclusivity, and partnerships with source communities. By creating a unified framework, museums can generate broader public interest, which in turn can stimulate external investment and support. Increased public engagement has the potential to pressure political actors into allocating more resources and attention to these initiatives, creating a positive feedback loop of improvement.

In addition, the implementation of minimum standards can lead to a ripple effect within the museum sector. As institutions demonstrate their commitment to decolonization, they may inspire others to follow suit, creating a wave of innovation and transformation across ethnographic museums. This collective momentum not only enhances credibility but also attracts visitors, who become active participants in this evolving narrative. Ultimately, by

[137] Interviewee N° 15 2023; Interviewee N° 9 2023.
[138] Whittington 2022.

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establishing minimum standards, museums can lay the groundwork for long-term systemic change while maintaining flexibility to adapt and evolve their approaches over time.

Become aware of the colonial nature

As basic as it sounds, the initial and fundamental step for any ethnographic museum seeking to address its colonial legacy is to develop a critical awareness of its own historical position and institutional nature. As demonstrated, museums are, by their nature and conception, products of colonial ideologies and practices.[139] Ted Loos[140] aptly describes decolonization as a movement that "calls institutions to account for their role in the history of colonialism." It is essential then for them to be cognizant of this and to be prepared to open a debate on it, as done by the Weltmuseum in Wien, for example.[141] Without such awareness, any attempts to address or resolve colonial legacies risk being superficial or ineffective.

Asserting the underlying colonial entanglements allows museums to shift perspective and critically interrogate their collections and narratives.[142] This examination can illuminate the gaps and silences within collections as well as the structural flaws in their systems of display and storytelling. Failing to undertake this self-reflective process risks, as Christina Kreps[143] warns, neglecting the recognition of the historical and colonial contingencies that shaped the collections. Such oversight results in a continued perpetuation of Eurocentric ideologies and prejudices, which underpin not only the origins of museum practices but also their ongoing discourse and exhibition strategies. Addressing this challenge requires more than a retrospective evaluation; it demands an in-depth analysis of contemporary museum practices, particularly in the context of former colonial frameworks.

Once a museum – conceived as a collective of institutional actors – is able to critically evaluate its own nature, it becomes more feasible to implement meaningful change. This process requires the involvement of all stakeholders whose role influences the development and conceptual direction of the museum. Developing an awareness of the colonial roots of the institution can catalyze a change of mindset, encouraging the adoption of postcolonial perspectives in both practice and philosophy.

However, this transition is far from simple. It often involves a fundamental reconfiguration of institutional operations, including the processes by which objects are acquired, cared for, and presented to the public. Within the museum, these tensions between innovation and conservatism can become particularly pronounced. Internal debates often reveal divergent priorities among curators, scientific committees, and administrative staff, with some advocating decolonization and others defending more static and traditional approaches.

These internal struggles often mirror external conflicts, such as those between museum professionals and community representatives, between curators and government agencies, or between museums and collaborating artists. To deal effectively with external tensions, it is essential to cultivate a cohesive internal consensus.

The process of guiding museums toward postcolonial thinking is long and challenging. It requires facing uncomfortable truths about the institution's past and overcoming the resistance that often accompanies structural change. The end result in embarking on this journey and dialogue is the growth and evolution of the museum itself, enabling it to become a more inclusive, self-critical, and socially engaged institution.[144]

[139] Brulon Soares and Leshchenko 2018; Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht 2022.
[140] Loos 2018.
[141] Augustat 2019.
[142] Ariese and Wróblewska 2022.
[143] Kreps 2011.
[144] Interviewee N° 8 2022; Interviewee N° 15 2023; Interviewee N° 6 2023.

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Train staff on colonial roots of the institution

The museum is made up not only of showcases and objects, but also of the people who work in them. To have a decolonized museum, it is therefore necessary that the effort to decolonize comes also from within.[145] For the people who work in a museum, it is complex to be aware of its colonial nature since they are part of the system itself, especially because hiring processes are hardly inclusive in Europe. For this reason, there is a need for an external point of view.[146] To have this, one possibility is to hire consultants or experts in postcolonialism to conduct training sessions, as done by Linden Museum for example. In case this is complicated or too costly, access to resources and literature on the subject is usually provided. The method that seems to work most effectively, however, is to create moments of dialogue and workshops with members of the community the museum represents[147] (e.g., Museo delle Culture del Mondo, Castello d'Albertis collaborated with Hopi communities). By engaging with these communities in a respectful and collaborative manner, museum staff can gain a deeper understanding of the cultures they represent and the impact of colonialism on them.[148] But it is important to continue questioning how we decide who are the people who can speak for these communities, trying not to replicate colonial practices, as the Linden Museum and Museo delle Culture del Mondo, Castello d'Albertis are trying to do.

While it may appear self-evident given the extensive discourse surrounding museum decolonization, the reality is often more complex. During the interviews conducted for this study, several respondents expressed the belief that decolonization was not relevant to their work or to the operations of their respective institutions. This observation underscores the internal conflicts previously discussed. The resistance to decolonization manifested in various forms, including justifications rooted in claims of immunity due to a museum's relatively recent establishment.

Such resistance also extended to outright denial of the need for decolonial efforts, opposition to restitution or repatriation initiatives, and a general reluctance to adopt decolonial practices.[149] Among these, the most insidious form of resistance is tokenism: instances where actions are framed as decolonial but remain superficial and fail to address the underlying structural issues and colonial legacies.[150] If there are still curators and experts who do not believe that this problem concerns them, there seems to be a need for more training[151].

Become aware of the multiplicity of possible narratives within the museum

A postcolonial approach in ethnographic museums should prioritize challenging Western, European representation. As suggested by both practice and literature, this can be achieved by fostering multivocality – representing and engaging with a diversity of viewpoints within the museum.[152] Brus et al.[153] argue that this involves representing and listening to a multitude of voices and perspectives while trying to create dialogues with the source communities. This includes the perspectives of the colonized populations, as well as those of the colonizers and curators.

[145] Ariese and Wróblewska 2022; Wysong 2021.
[146] Interviewee N° 15 2023; Interviewee N° 9 2023.
[147] Hochschild 2020; Interviewee N° 3 2022.
[148] Palamara 2018; Garcia, Macdonald, and Kahanu 2021.
[149] Interviewee N°12 2022; Interviewee N° 1 2022; Interviewee N° 2 2022.
[150] Ariese and Wróblewska 2022.
[151] Interviewee N° 3 2022.
[152] Garcia, Macdonald, and Kahanu 2021; Peers 2013; Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 4 2023; Interviewee N° 6 2023; Interviewee N° 13 and Interviewee N° 14 2023; Interviewee N° 15 2023.
[153] Brus, Zillinger, and Knecht 2022.

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A museum characterized as "open-door" welcomes the opinions of communities, while striving to avoid tokenistic or temporary measures. Instead, such an approach necessitates the pursuit of long-term relationships that transcend the scope of temporary exhibitions or consultations.[154] For example, as demonstrated by the Linden Museum, this involves questioning how to foster stable and enduring connections. Through sustained community involvement, the museum's thinking and operations can evolve, creating an ongoing dialogue that reflects the societal changes demanded in the present.

Decoloniality, therefore, requires the integration of all voices, even those that have been invisible. Thus, creating a narrative within the museum that is more nuanced and allows the complexity of what is behind it to be explained, as well as being more inclusive.[155] As articulated by Sium et al., "the decolonization project seeks to reimagine and re-articulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies."[156] The author is keen to emphasize that when she speaks of all voices, she means both those inside and outside the museum, namely not only those of the scientific committees, curators and workers but also those of the communities represented, artists, and visitors.

This integration of perspectives must be reflected across all museum practices – from the creation of captions to collaborative initiatives – ensuring that visitors are informed about the museum's colonial past while promoting growth and transformation across multiple dimensions.

Question the status of object "owners" to rewrite the role of "curators"

Museums have traditionally been considered the "keepers" of objects, and their main function was to collect, preserve, and display these objects for the public.[157] A central point in the debate of museum decolonization concerns the recognition by museums that they are not owners but custodians of those collections. The term *curator* suggests a more active and engaged role for museums, involving the selection, interpretation, and presentation of objects in a broader social and cultural context.[158] This entails an obligation to the peoples who created the objects and histories and their descendants.[159] Museums must essentially stop conceiving of themselves as owners with rights, in favor of a vision of custodians with obligations.[160] This is the approach taken by the Ilaria Alpi Italian-African Museum when it was dismantled and decided to become a dynamic museum with open archives.

This emphasizes the role of curators, but it is not only up to them. It is about enacting an ideological deconstruction of how curatorship and heritage *per se* are perceived.[161] This requires the participation of different actors, such as members of scientific committees, politicians, but also visitors. It therefore means, not adopting a problematic nature of the concept of caring, because if misinterpreted it could create a renewed relationship of alterity between those in a situation of need and the helpers. The relationship between the curator and the object, the relationship of care, should be perceived as a horizontal relationship. Otherwise one simply changes terminology without actually doing anything to modify the vertical relationship that exists currently.

[154] Interviewee N° 10 2023; Interviewee N° 15 2023.
[155] Mallard, Eggel, and Galvin 2021.
[156] Sium, Desai, and Ritskes 2012.
[157] Maranda and Brulon Soares 2017.
[158] McCall and Gray 2014.
[159] Howarth 2018.
[160] Howarth 2018; Thomas 2013.
[161] Mattez 2023.

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Stop and limit harmful practices

This last point only emerged from one of the interviews conducted,[162] but it appeared to the author as one of the fundamental and all-encompassing practices to be adopted. Looking at the history of ethnographic museums, it is evident how it is linked to the colonization and theft of cultural heritage. The display and interpretation of these materials in ethnographic museums perpetuate colonial narratives and stereotypes.[163] For example, many exhibitions keep depicting non-Western cultures as primitive, exotic, and inferior to Western culture.[164] The use of words such as *primitive*" and "savage" reinforces these negative stereotypes and perpetuates harmful colonial attitudes toward subjugated populations throughout history.[165] To stop it is complicated, as it means questioning and revising every detail within one's own performance, opening up to external dialogue, particularly with the source communities. It therefore asks for a revision of the way things have been done, exhibited, and described to date in order to understand whether we are harming or have harmed someone so that is possible to change them. This can be done, for example, by changing a label, removing a piece from the display (e.g., as done by Museo delle Culture del Mondo, Castello d'Albertis in Genova), telling the story of how the items came to be showcased.

In order to try and stop these practices that have harmed and continue to harm communities, all of the aforementioned minimum standards are needed. Once one becomes aware of its colonial past and the harm that has been done, it is easier to work toward remediation. What museums for now are usually putting into practice are excuses and attempts at repair, for instance by implementing tokenism or thinking of repairing the damage with repatriations.[166] These take the form of actions such as the return of stolen artefacts and financial compensation that are seen as means to heal the wounds of colonialism.[167] The most important thing, however, is not to get entangled in these methods, because the harm that has been done can never be taken away or removed.[168] The institution has to change its approach to colonization; otherwise, it ends up operating neocolonial actions, continuing to perpetuate the unequal power relations that led to the creation of this situation in the first place[169].

The decolonization of museums represents a complex and multifaceted undertaking, requiring thoughtful and deliberate strategies.[170] Although its ultimate goal is to promote equity, justice, and inclusivity, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to achieving this goal.[171] Some museums may need to prioritize dialogue with source communities, others might need to modernize their governance structures to facilitate a reevaluation of their practices, and still others may benefit from engaging contemporary artists to critically reassess their exhibition methodologies.[172] The diversity of needs and contexts underscores the absence of a single, all-encompassing approach; indeed, such a uniform strategy would neglect the unique identities of individual museums and the specific cultures they represent.

To address this diversity while maintaining ethical responsibility and accountability, the introduction of minimum standards provides a shared framework for museums committed

[162] Interviewee N° 15 2023.
[163] Karp, Lavine, and Rockefeller Foundation 1991.
[164] Bonilla 2009.
[165] Fromm 2016; Shiraiw 2021.
[166] Ariese and Wróblewska 2022.
[167] Leone 2022; McAuliffe 2021.
[168] Interviewee N° 15 2023; Sengupta, Sumsita 2021.
[169] Leone 2022; Rivet 2020; Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019.
[170] Mallard, Eggel, and Galvin 2021.
[171] American Alliance of Museums 2017.
[172] Interviewee N° 3 2022; Interviewee N° 9 2023; Interviewee N° 5 2023.

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Becoming aware of colonial nature	Train staff on colonial roots of the institution	Becoming aware of the multiplicity of possible narratives within the museum	Questioning the status of object 'owners' to rewrite the role of 'curators'	Stop and limit harmful practices
E.g. Weltmuseums in Vienna and Linden Museum have done it by questioning their colonial roots.	E.g. Linden Museum has created moment of dialogue and education for its staff.	E.g. Museo delle Culture del Mondo Carlo d'Albertis has worked on this by creating collaboration with Hopi communities for give new interpretation to their collection.	E.g. "Ilaria Alpi" Italo-African Museum has worked on the concept of curatorship instead as seeing itself as owners of the collection.	E.g. Pitt Rivers Museum, Linden Museum are working on limiting and stoping practices that could still be harmful for the source communities of their collections.

Figure 2. Summary of the five variables with examples from ethnographic museums in Europe.

to decolonization. These five practices (see Figure 2) are designed to offer a foundational guide applicable not only to museum professionals but also to visitors. By establishing clear and measurable objectives, these standards equip museums to set tangible goals for decolonization and empower visitors to assess and critique institutional performance. This role as controller of the museum's work is in fact also attributed to them in the literature[173] and should therefore be expanded.

Minimum standards can also serve as a mechanism for holding museums accountable for their actions and progress. Moreover, the establishment of a common framework can facilitate collaborative projects among museums, fostering a shared understanding and exchange of best practices. Importantly, according to the author, these standards can enhance transparency toward source communities, a critical step in building trust and laying the groundwork for further collaboration.

It is essential to recognize that these standards are intended only as a baseline. They provide a starting point from which museums can develop their own tailored and context-sensitive decolonial approaches, reflecting their unique histories, collections, and relationships with communities. In this way, minimum standards function as both a foundation for collective accountability and a springboard for individual institutional growth.

Conclusions: Unlocking current museum practices to release further prospects for decolonization

A large part of the tangible and intangible collections from around the world found in European museum collections today was collected under colonial conditions and often with the use of force. These colonial paradigms have historically extended beyond collection practices to shape various other museum activities.[174] Displays and knowledge dissemination, for instance, have been grounded in Western colonial and racial ideologies, perpetuating a binary opposition between "us" and "the other." Although the intention was to disseminate knowledge of cultures other than Western ones, the way they were narrated and exhibited did nothing but empty different cultures into labels that were anything but representative.[175] Scholars such as Spivak argue that such representations persist due to enduring power structures, particularly in dialogue and language.[176] Western, European knowledge is still perceived as universal, while the Third World is portrayed as always one step behind.[177]

[173] Stam 1993.
[174] Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2023.
[175] Allain Bonilla 2019.
[176] Morris 2010.
[177] Chakrabarty 2000.

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Adopting a postcolonial lens, Stanton[178] suggests that ethnographic museums analyze different kinds of knowledge, and their collections become means of communication. This perspective gained traction in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, prompting the restructuring of many collections in an effort to move beyond the dichotomous frameworks established by colonialism.[179]

The decolonial impulse has gradually reshaped museums, albeit in a piecemeal and protracted manner.[180] Today, requests for a change have returned to the public scene, also thanks to the Black Lives Matters and Rhodes Must Fall movements, alongside initiatives by governments like that of France to address colonial legacies, which have reignited public discourse and demands for change.[181] However, the multifaceted nature of the issue has complicated the development of universal solutions, resulting in diverse practices across different areas of museum work.

This research identifies a path forward by advocating for the adoption of minimum standards as a shared framework to guide museums in initiating a postcolonial approach. According to the author, a museum, in order to be able to say that it has begun its decolonization process, must therefore become aware of the colonial nature of the museum, train staff on the colonial legacies within the museum, become aware of the multiplicity of possible narratives within the museum, question its status as "keeper" in order to rewrite its role as "curator," and stop and limit harmful practices. By creating this sharable framework, the author claims, it should lead all museums, even those that do not feel involved, to share the same grounding.

These minimum standards are intended as a foundational guide for all stakeholders within a museum, including both employees and visitors. By providing clear, measurable objectives, they enable greater accountability for decolonization efforts and foster transparency. This shared framework has the potential to encourage collaborative initiatives, enhance investments in decolonization projects, and strengthen the relationships between museums and source communities.

Furthermore, the establishment of minimum standards can invigorate internal efforts while also empowering external stakeholders to critique and drive institutional growth. Such a framework facilitates the exchange of criticism, which is essential for progress. The author emphasizes that these five practices are not exhaustive but serve as a starting point from which museums can develop their own tailored approaches to decolonization. Ultimately, museums should aspire to become spaces that promote cultural enrichment, dialogue, and social connection. Through the adoption of these standards, museums can take significant steps toward addressing their colonial legacies and embracing their roles as dynamic, inclusive institutions.[182]

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[178] Stanton 2011.
[179] Britannica 2022.
[180] Interviewee N° 9 2023; Interviewee N° 3 2022.
[181] Pirri 2018.
[182] Harrison 1994.

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