

Conference Report :

Ready for the Past? On the State of Decolonisation in Swiss Museums

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The international conference 'Ready for the Past? On the State of Decolonisation in Swiss Museums', organized by the University of Lausanne's Centre of International History and Political Studies of Globalization, was held on May 4 and 5, 2022, at the Palais de Rumine in Lausanne, Switzerland. The conference's premise was the growing awareness in Switzerland that more justice may be achieved in the future only through critical engagement with the colonial past and its legacies. In Switzerland, as elsewhere, some museums have recently started to critically investigate the provenance of artefacts that were collected during the colonial period. Others plan exhibitions on the involvement of their respective towns and cantons in the transatlantic slave trade, and in colonial violence and exploitation. Yet, the question whether it is at all possible to 'decolonise' museums and other cultural institutions in the global north - which continue to benefit from centuries of imperial dominance over the global south - remains open. The practicalities of decolonisation, and the strength of political will for its implementation, have also to be clarified.

Therefore, the Lausanne conference brought together museum researchers, curators, and artists from Switzerland and abroad, to firstly take stock of what has already been achieved in Switzerland and other European countries. Secondly, the conference's aim was to provide a platform for networking and connecting across Switzerland's linguistic and cantonal borders, as well as with colleagues from beyond Switzerland. Most importantly, however, the conference served as a forum to critically discuss challenges, possibilities, and scenarios for 'decolonisation' in a country that still largely downplays and denies any involvement in or responsibilities for Europe's violent colonial history.

Introduction¹

FRANCESCO PANESE (Lausanne) welcomed the participants on behalf of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Lausanne. He spiced his opening speech with an anecdote:

¹ Video recording of the introduction and the roundtable: SSP UNIL, Ready for the Past? On the State of Decolonisation in Swiss Museums, YouTube, online: <https://youtu.be/XZmTj8rranE>, accessed on 02.06.2022.

biopiracy is a form of contemporary colonialism that consists, in the West, of stealing biological knowledge from so-called developing countries – a problem he faced in 2001, when he was a museum director in Lausanne. His hope is that today's museums can eliminate their own devices of disempowerment because colonisation must be a thing of the past. The conference can contribute to this end, he said.

THOMAS DAVID (Lausanne) reminded the audience that a conference such as this one would not have been imaginable one or two decades ago. Until fairly recently, Swiss historiography remained rather self-centred. It was the 'Independent Commission of Experts: Switzerland–Second World War' (1997–2002) that dismantled the myth of Swiss neutrality during World War II. Subsequently, other historians embarked on a series of critical studies. Researchers studied Swiss participation in slavery, colonisation, and in scientific racism. The next step is to go beyond academia, and to collaborate with other experts, e. g. in decolonising the colonial legacy in museums, institutions, and public spaces.

BERNHARD C. SCHÄR (Lausanne) spoke about the greater importance of Switzerland for the European colonial expansion. The thousands of artefacts from the colonial period in Swiss museum collections are just one testimony to how involved Switzerland was in the process of violent European expansion. However, this remarkable Swiss participation in colonialism was only possible because the larger imperial nations of Europe welcomed, or at least were open to, Swiss capital investment, as well as settlers, missionaries, mercenaries, merchants, and scientists. Many Swiss imperial enablers were passionate collectors and donated natural and cultural artefacts to Swiss museums. Asian reptiles, Andean masks, and African ancestral remains in today's Swiss museum collections, not only tell a story of Swiss 'colonialism without colonies' – as Patricia Purtschert, Barbara Lüthi, and Francesca Falk famously put it –, they also tell a new story of empire per se. A Swiss perspective on imperialism reveals that behind undeniable imperial competition among European nations, there was also a story of continuous cooperation, and a still little explored process of European social, economic, and cultural integration through collaborative imperial expansion.

Roundtable

The roundtable, moderated by **ROHIT JAIN** (Zurich) and **STEPHANIE GINALSKI** (Lausanne), consisted of two blocks. The first focused on transnational and transdisciplinary knowledge production in the present time; while the second investigated how to balance pragmatic and visionary solutions to decolonialisation.

STEPHANIE ARCHANGEL, curator at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, spoke about the existence of a Black community in Amsterdam between 1630 and 1660, located in Jodenbreestraat. Rembrandt's paintings of these people were pre-colonial – in the sense that these paintings did not present colonial stereotypes but were executed with dignity and respect. The exhibition 'Here. Black in Rembrandt's Time' took place in 2020 at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The objects in this exhibition (like those in other exhibitions) must be studied holistically in their artistic, historical, sociological contexts. This, however, requires more transdisciplinary cooperation because no one can be a specialist in everything. On the practical side, attention has also to focus on how to increase efforts to involve migrant, Black, and indigenous communities in Europe, and the former colonies. This includes accepting forms of knowledge and expertise that cannot be acquired through academic study, but are crucial if 'decolonisation' is to be an authentic and transformative project.

HELEN BIERI THOMSON, the managing director of the Swiss National Museum's branch in French-speaking Switzerland (Château de Prangins), talked about the way in which her museum addresses Switzerland's role in the slave trade. The permanent exhibition puts the focus on the manufacture and market of textiles: in Geneva, for example, entrepreneurs produced 'indiennes' (chintz; imitations of fabrics imported from India) that served as bargaining items in Africa to finance the Atlantic slave trade. The exhibition focusses on how people acting locally became involved in the global structures of slavery. In general, if museums are to be decolonised, it is necessary to collaborate not only with academics, but also with independent researchers, artists, and other stakeholders, from beyond the Western world. It is equally important to consider not only the category of race alone, but also how it intersected with other categories, such as gender and sexuality.

CIRAJ RASSOOL, professor of History at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa (Cape Town), is one of the leading experts in the field of Museum studies. He argued that certain disciplinary categories (reflected in museum names and collections) should no longer exist, e. g. the separation between 'Anthropology' and 'Ethnology', which still exists in Germany. The former denotes physical studies about human beings and the latter social and cultural studies. In the debate on restitutions, there is, in Germany, an association of violence with 'Anthropology', but not with 'Ethnology'. This separation is clearly inadequate. The case of South Africa is complex, since it was both colonised by Europeans, but acted as a coloniser itself in Namibia. The country is still steeped in this entangled colonial legacy, of which the National Museum in Bloemfontein is a preeminent example. There is a need to decolonise museology in general, and this implies rethinking collections and exhibitions. Becoming a 'post-ethnographic' museum requires more collaboration, as well as political change. Restitution, in particular of human remains, can serve as a transformative strategy. It ought to be

understood not as a singular act, but rather as an ongoing process aiming at fundamentally alter relationships between museums and publics, and between the global north and the global south.

PIERRE SINGARAVELOU, professor of history in King's College in London and the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, emphasized that today's necessity to rethink disciplinarity is linked to the historical context of colonialism, in which disciplines such as geography and anthropology took shape. Also, the concepts of colonisation and decolonisation need to be reconsidered in order to encourage a common vision. He called for a better collaboration between museums and universities, especially in France. It is also important to diversify exhibition artifacts, utilizing archival documents, such as maps. He explained the role of geography and cartography – not only European, but also Asian – as a channel of world representation, subjectivity, and alterity: an object with visual and intellectual impact.

Panel 1: Provenance and Restitution²

The panel, chaired by **LIONEL PERNET** (Lausanne), was dedicated to one of most topical recent themes with regard to museums and decolonisation, namely research in to the provenance of collections that were acquired in contexts of colonial domination, and discussion about restitution of artefacts to descendant communities.

ANNA SCHMID, director of the Basel anthropological museum (Museum der Kulturen), spoke about the trajectory of objects before they were acquired by museums. Today, researchers are questioning the provenance of this heritage – including how it was acquired and not only how it was produced. In Basel, there are important collections acquired through missionaries and other colonial agents. The Museum der Kulturen is investigating this with its research teams and other institutions and communities. This is a complex process involving many legal and moral considerations, but also finding ways of overcoming difficulties rooted in political circumstances and economic inequalities. However, museums ought to commit themselves in principle to unconditional restitutions.

Speaking about the return of a small statue representing the Andean deity 'Ekeko' from the Bern Historical Museum to Bolivia in 2014, historian **TOMAS BARTOLETTI** (Florence) discussed the challenges of provenance research. The 'Ekeko' was obtained in the 19th century by the Swiss explorer and diplomat Johann Jakob von Tschudi. Controversies revolving around its restitution in 2014 highlight various tensions in contemporary European cultures, Bartoletti argued. Critical historical contextualisation can challenge the museum's own scholarly understandings of what their cultural artefacts signify. Anxieties within museums that restitutions processes can be

² Video recording of panel 1: SSP UNIL, Provenance and Restitution, YouTube, online: <https://youtu.be/XEiQ-9DaJJQ>, accessed on 02.06.2022.

instrumentalised by politicians, e. g. in Bolivia, ought to take into account that museums too were never neutral and unpolitical spaces themselves. These reflections are necessary if relationships between European museums and societies from whom cultural artefacts were taken are not to fall into the trap of neocolonialism.

Historian and provenance researcher **ESTHER TISA** from the Rietberg Museum in Zurich, presented the latest activities in Zurich, including the 2018/19 exhibition 'The Question of Provenance. Unwrapping Collection History'. In 2021/22, a collaborative research program between Switzerland and Nigeria was launched by the Rietberg Museum under the name 'Benin Initiative'. Various Swiss and Nigerian researchers are participating in the program, as well as leading museums of history and ethnography in Switzerland. The goal of the 'Benin Initiative' is to understand the provenance of approximately one hundred objects stored in Switzerland that belonged to Benin City before the British plundering in 1897. Financed by the Federal Office of Culture, the program also examines the issue of restitution and responsibility of museums.

Lausanne is also active on the front of provenance research and cooperation with indigenous communities. Art historian **CLAIRE BRIZON** (Lausanne) gave a very concrete example of the work of historical and geographical reconstruction of the trajectory of objects. An axe from New Caledonia was able to be identified by its vernacular name, 'gi okono' or 'n'bouet', thanks to the contribution of a poet from New Caledonia who was invited to collaborate with the Cantonal Museum of Archaeology and History. The object (inv. no. 04547) is currently on display at the Palais de Rumine as part of the exhibition 'Retracer la provenance'.

Panel 2: Human Remains in Swiss Collections³

The panel chairwoman, **PRISKA GISLER** (Bern), was in charge of an emotionally charged subject-matter that has hardly been debated in public in Switzerland so far: namely the question of how many skulls, skeletons, and other body parts from colonised individuals (so-called human or ancestral remains) are to be found in Swiss collections, and what to do with them.

BASIL THURING, co-director of the Basel Natural History Museum, spoke about collections of human remains in Basel and Solothurn. The human remains in their possession came from all around the world. They were objects of study of anthropologists, who created these collections in colonial times. The Natural History Museum in Basel holds many skulls from Sri Lanka, complete skeletons from Chile, and many more places. If previously the study of these remains followed a natural science

³ Video recording of panel 2: SSP UNIL, Human Remains in Swiss Collections, YouTube, online: <https://youtu.be/-RSCdl12c1s>, accessed on 02.06.2022.

perspective, in recent years the focus has been on the often-violent practices of acquisition. Basil Thuring also emphasized that his museum is open to restitution.

ROBERTA COLOMBO DOUGOUD, from the Geneva Ethnographical Museum, questioned the concept of human remains. Things that for a museum in Europe are human remains, for indigenous communities are ancestral remains. Are we referring to bones, hair, or necklaces? It all depends on the meaning attributed to them. Various experiences with Oceania's indigenous communities, such as the Maori, made it possible to develop important, and durable partnerships in Geneva at her museum. The restitution process is long: it is a negotiation process, not an one-time event. It involves governments and politics. While the curators and their teams do not have the power to make political decisions, they can develop cooperations, mediate, and produce knowledge. They can also produce alternative strategies, such as relationships with indigenous people to promote the collections without disbanding them. The goal is to open doors, so to speak, not to close them.

SALLY SCHONFELDT (Canberra/Zurich) is an artist-researcher, and activist currently pursuing research on ancestral remains of indigenous Australians in Swiss museums. Working alongside indigenous communities, she advocates the returning of such remains to their legitimate owners. The restitution of ancestral remains is essential because it is a question of dignity and responsibility. Born in Australia, she works in Switzerland. This interconnection has enabled her to develop an artistic practice - with videos, exhibitions, and more - that questions the museum situation in Europe by means of historical investigation and cultural critique. Ultimately, her work seeks to open up new spaces in which European museum practitioners and indigenous Australians can overcome colonial legacies that still stand in the way of more just human relationships.

Finally, **NIRA WICKRAMASINGHE**, professor of modern south Asian studies at the University of Leiden (The Netherlands), spoke about a study she conducted several years ago about the restitution of the skull of Keppetipola Disawe to Sri Lanka in the mid-20th century. He was one of the leaders in the anti-imperial struggles against British colonisers and was executed in 1818. The British took his skull as a kind of trophy and made it part of a phrenological exhibition in Britain. When Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, it demanded the restitution of Keppetipola's skull. This restitution stimulated national sentiment and patriotism in Sri Lanka at the time. However, as Wickramasinghe pointed out, Sri Lankan restitution claims were not innocent. They were part of a decolonialisation strategy, sure enough, but they were also part of an elitist form of nationalism by representatives of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority population. The case study thus reveals multiple layers of political meanings inscribed into Keppetipola's skull, and the claims revolving around it: from colonial taxonomy and pseudoscientific practices during British imperial rule, to exclusionary forms of nationalism in the postcolonial period.

Panel 3: Decolonising the Narrative⁴

NOEMIE ETIENNE (Bern) chaired a session that addressed the question of how to decolonise narratives. Several issues were discussed, such as difficulties of accessing archives. The presentations included concrete examples of decolonising narratives.

SAID ADRUS, an Indian-Kenyan artist whose family migrated to Burgdorf during the struggles of decolonisation, and who went on to London in the 1980s, where he became an important voice in anti-racist art movements, presented a short film on the role of Indian soldiers in the British Army during World War I. Many of these soldiers died in Europe and were buried in Britain. Adrus's work merges historical film documents with images of memorials and burial sites for fallen Muslim soldiers in present day Britain that have been forgotten and neglected. With his work Said seeks to reactivate public memory of colonised Muslim soldiers who lost their lives in the service of the empire. His work thereby also offers a critique of present-day racism towards Muslims and migrants. Ultimately, Said's work challenges us to rethink the categories of Christians and Muslims, Europe, Asia and Africa. These categories have always been intertwined and the long, yet marginalized, presence of colonised 'others' in Europe's history and the present ought to be acknowledged.

DENISE TONELLA, Director of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich, explained that Switzerland is often seen as a nation without a colonial past because there were no Swiss formal colonies. It is an argument that is still being perpetuated even by Swiss federal authorities on state visits abroad and at home. Yet, it is a false claim. Recognizing and documenting the participation of Swiss entrepreneurs, Swiss explorers, and Swiss settlers in colonial rule is a first step. Many museums contribute to this with exhibitions of objects and stories of how Swiss people became involved in colonialism. The second step would be to think what to do with the colonial legacy of Switzerland. The Swiss National Museum in Zurich is planning for 2024 an exhibition called 'Switzerland and Colonialism', in which these issues will be discussed.

DENETH PIUMAKSHI VEDA ARACHCHIGE is an independent artist from Sri Lanka living in France. His interest lies, among other things, in the colonial role of Switzerland in Sri Lanka. In her country, Switzerland is not associated to colonisation; yet, as Bernhard C. Schär's book 'Tropenliebe' has shown, the histories of Basel's anthropological and natural history museums are strongly rooted in colonialism, given that large parts of their collections were acquired by their founders Paul and Fritz Sarasin, who started their careers as travellers through colonial Ceylon and elsewhere in the late 19th century. In her artistic work, Piumakshi aims at giving Sri Lankan people, who appear only

⁴ Video recording of panel 3: SSP UNIL, Decolonising the Narrative, YouTube, online: <https://youtu.be/qQJnI5Ys1ug>, accessed on 02.06.2022.

anonymously – if at all – in Swiss archives, a voice, a face, and historical relevance. By retracing step by step the Sarasins' itinerary, the artist found the places and people whom the two Swiss explorers had visited and exploited more than a century ago. In this way she juxtaposed past and present landscapes. She placed old photos of indigenous people in present-day contexts, and she discussed this history with local people, provoking reflections, and emotions.

CHANTAL LAFONTANT VALLOTTON, co-director of the Neuchâtel Art and History Museum, presented recent developments on the narrative of Switzerland and slavery in Neuchâtel. In 2011, the permanent exhibition at her museum had a small section on slavery. Many people refused the discussion, speaking of moral and psychological anachronism. Now the situation is very different. There is an action plan and an art competition to decolonise public spaces, such as the statue of David de Pury. A new permanent, called 'Movements', in which slavery is thematised, opened in 2022. This process is helping to decolonise the museum's narrative and to fight racism, goals deemed impossible just a decade ago.

Workshop

ALINE MINDER, from the Historical Museum in Bern, moderated a workshop session at the end of the conference. Participants split up in small groups to discuss further some of the questions that came up during the panel sessions. One example was the theme of ancestral remains in Switzerland. Many participants were surprised to learn that several thousand ancestral remains seem to exist in Swiss collections, but that next to nothing is known about them. Other discussions revolved around the question of how to include more experts from universities, museums, and social movements in Asia, Africa, or Latin America.

Overall, there was not always agreement between the conference participants' during two days of intense discussions. However, the debates unfolded mostly in a spirit of respect, and a willingness to understand one another across disciplinary, institutional, and linguistic boundaries. Since a number of museums are planning exhibitions on Switzerland's colonial history and legacy, these topical discussions are sure to continue in the years to come.

Fabio Rossinelli

Conference Overview

- Francesco Panese (Vice-Dean, Faculty of Social and Political Science, University of Lausanne)
- Bernhard Schär & Thomas David (Co-Convenors, University of Lausanne)

Roundtable

- Stephanie Archangel (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)
- Helen Bieri Thomson (Swiss National Museum, Prangins)
- Ciraj Rassool (University of the Western Cape, South Africa)
- Pierre Singaravélou (King's College, London; University of Paris 1 Panthéon-La Sorbonne)
- Moderation: Stéphanie Ginalska (University of Lausanne) & Rohit Jain (University of Zurich)

Panel 1 – Provenance and Restitution

- Tomás Bartoletti (European University Institute, Florence)
- Claire Brizon (Association Suisse de Recherche en Provenance; Musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire, Lausanne)
- Anna Schmid (Museum der Kulturen, Basel)
- Esther Tisa (Rietberg Museum, Zürich)
- Chair: Lionel Pernet (Musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire, Lausanne)

Panel 2 – Human Remains in Swiss Collections

- Roberta Colombo Dougoud (Musée d'ethnographie, Geneva)
- Sally Schonfeldt (Australian National University, Canberra)
- Basil Thuring (Naturhistorisches Museum, Basel)
- Nira Wickramasinghe (University of Leiden, Netherlands)
- Chair: Priska Gisler (Academy of Arts, Bern)

Panel 3 – Decolonising the Narrative

- Said Adrus (Independent Artist London/Burgdorf)
- Chantal Lafontant Vallotton (Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Neuchâtel)
- Denise Tonella (Swiss National Museum, Zurich)
- Deneth Piumakshi Veda Arachchige (Multidisciplinary Artist, Sri Lanka/France)
- Chair: Noémie Etienne (University of Bern)

Workshop – Can we collaborate?

- Chair: Aline Minder (Bernisches Historisches Museum)