

MUDEC_OLTRE LA VETRINA_EP.5

Marina Pugliese: Ethnographic collections raise many complex issues for museums, especially with regard to the history of the objects themselves: Were they originally bought and paid for? Are they part of so-called “tourist art” – meaning they were produced specifically for the West? Or perhaps they are the result of wartime or colonial looting? As we learned in the third episode of this podcast – from the interview with Massimo Osanna, General Director of Museums at the Ministry of Culture in Italy, looting in wartime has been commonplace since ancient times.

Before discussing the subject further, let me introduce myself: my name is Marina Pugliese, and I am the Director of MUDEC – the Museum of Cultures in Milan. In this podcast series, you’ll hear the voices of those who work in the fields of culture, science and anthropology.

The preservation of cultural heritage should be of utmost importance to everyone in the world, which is why a universal form of protection for artworks and artifacts was required. Following the Second World War, and specifically in 1954, the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* was adopted with support from Unesco. Now widely known as the 1954 Hague Convention, it focussed on protecting cultural heritage both in times of peace and of armed conflict.

A few years later, in the 1960s, African independence movements began to demand – in addition to the end of colonialism – the recovery and revival of their own cultural memory and identity. On December 14, 1960, the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* was signed by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This process led to the signing of the Unesco Convention in 1970.

The Unesco Convention declares that – quote – “Theft, looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property is a crime. It deprives people of their history and culture; it weakens social cohesion in the long term. It fuels organized crime and contributes to the financing of terrorism” – end of quote.

The Unesco Convention, and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, marked the obligation to return stolen, illegally exported or excavated cultural objects to their countries of origin.

In the context of these complicated legal issues, the research of provenance has developed considerably in recent years: many museums in Europe are tackling this issue through research projects, conferences, publications; and many cultural institutions have even instituted the figure of provenance researcher. The Humboldt Forum in Berlin is with no doubt one of the museums that is strongly pushing this debate: in its current show *Exhibiting. Omissions*, the only objects on display come

from Tanzania – and only behind explicit consent on the behalf of the items' descendants. It is an exhibition that opens the debate in society on the Eurocentric perspective in displaying colonial heritage.

But there is also another important matter to consider in this episode: how should museums deal with new proposals for donations, when the origin cannot be documented unequivocally and with certainty?

Clearly, museums are required to study and research the origin of the objects they are interested in, but the history of these objects is often blurred and difficult to trace. Most European ethnographic museums will not accept a donation unless proven that it entered Europe before 1970 – or before the signing of the Unesco Convention. But is this a sufficient requirement? And if the objects are not accepted by public institutions, where will they end up? Will they return to their country of origin or, more probably, go up for sale on the market?

Oltre la vetrina – Beyond the Showcase is a podcast series from MUDEC, the Museum of Cultures in Milan, and is produced with the support of Chora Media.

At MUDEC, we have decided to explore these issues in a workshop coordinated by the anthropologist Paul Basu – who is also president of our museum board and curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Basu coordinated this workshop alongside anthropologist Jonas Tinius, sociologist Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau', and Sara Chiesa – curator for African Art at MUDEC.

The idea for the workshop came about after a proposal of acquisition for a collection offered to Mudec on the behalf of the owner's heirs. The collection was made up of several objects – mainly from African countries – with several different origins, market provenances, cultures and histories, thus raising many problems such as legal issues, authenticity, and context of origin.

During the workshop, some of these objects were discussed with museum curators, specialists, connoisseurs, collectors, and communities of interest.

In this episode, Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau' talks with Paul Basu about the various perspectives that should be considered for an ethical approach to collecting objects with an uncertain origin.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': Hi, Paul. It's nice having you here. Welcome.

Paul Basu: Thank you very much. Very pleased to be here.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': The first question would be about your opinion and approach regarding the exhibitions of ethnographic artifacts and artworks. What experiences have shaped your vision the most?

Paul Basu: Yeah, I think I, I do approach exhibition as an anthropologist, I suppose. My broad approach to exhibition is that exhibitions are a kind of a space for asking questions, really rather than perhaps a conventional idea of an exhibition as something authoritative that's kind of conveying expert knowledge to audiences that, you know, are supposedly not expert. I'd see exhibition more as a kind of a medium for really engaging people in a conversation and a shared kind of exploration of an issue. So, in many of my own projects, I bring exhibition into, into my research. So it becomes an extension of a research project. For instance, in Cambridge, I curated an exhibition called *[Re:]Entanglements*, which was all looking at a kind of a colonial collection assembled by a particular anthropologist in West Africa in the, in the early 20th century. And we in the project, we'd revisited the very places where the material had been collected and the project involved re-engaging those communities, but also other stakeholders, to think about the different ways in which these histories, the history of colonialism, the histories of the communities themselves, diasporic commissions, communities and so on are differently entangled in that material. So we brought together the historical collections, we brought together contemporary artworks responding to it. We displayed things looking at what I call the material metaphors within the collections themselves, around damage, around entanglement and so on, and really worked with the, the material archive, if you like to create a kind of an essay question, if you like, in an exhibitionary form.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': As we were saying, these objects reflect different narratives. So, from those of the curators and collectors to those of their communities of origin, as you highlighted and stressed. How can museums represent such a plurality of voices in a balanced and respectful manner?

Paul Basu: Yeah, well, firstly, I mean, there isn't one curatorial kind of knowledge, as it were. You know, curators are capable of having, understanding the diversity of perspectives on collections, too. So I don't, I don't think there is that singularity there. But, of course, particularly if one's opening up questions to ask kind of contemporary issues, it's about, you know, curating as it were relationships more than anything. You know, different stakeholders, different kinds of expertise that exist certainly beyond the museum itself, and kind of holding them in kind of dialogue with that more particular kind of knowledge, more perhaps scholarly knowledge, particular kind of scholarship that curators have. So that might be through kind of research projects. It might be through public engagement programs. And, you know, this is this idea of exhibition as a kind of an exploratory place. The challenge is to be able

to represent that through exhibition media in effective, kind of engaging ways, to find that balance. I curated an exhibition, a small exhibition around one object, one mask from Sierra Leone, for instance, at the British Museum. And the exhibition was all about the different perspectives on this one object. You know, not only the community or the curator, but different academic kind of perspectives, art, historical, anthropological, thinking about the history, in relation to Sierra Leone in this case, as well as those kind of community voices and so on. So I think there's many ways of being able to do that and to illustrate how a single object even can be understood in multiple ways.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': How do major museums handle donations and acquisitions? Could you provide some significant examples to clarify how the process works?

Paul Basu: Yeah. Well, I suppose specifically in relation to ethnographic museums, many museums, of course, have inherited collections. So many ethnographic collections in European ethnographic museums, for instance, are historical. They were collected during the colonial era, for instance. Now this has changed, of course. So a large kind of proportion of new acquisitions are really through commissions. So it's largely through commissioning artists to produce work, often in conversation with those historic collections. Other times there may be a specific exhibition or project which does entail collecting more generally.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': Regarding curating, MUDEC held a two day workshop on the ethics of curating and collecting for ethnographic museums. Can you tell us what transpired and what were the main takeaways from this event?

Paul Basu: Yes, I mean, we had a workshop that was really dealing with the ethics of, of collecting. We were, in a way, testing this notion that the museum is the kind of source of all knowledge and expertise, and instead looking at how actually many situations in a museum are uncertain, particularly around the provenance of collections. When we were talking about how museums collect, how they access new, new things, another way, of course, is that maybe dealers, private collectors offer collections to museums, for instance. And one of the challenges, of course, is that part of a museum's kind of due diligence, its ethical practice is to establish kind of the legitimacy of their ownership before donating something to a museum. And in the absence of provenance information, for instance, this becomes very difficult. This links, you know, to this workshop we've been having, which is based around a

particular collection that's been offered to the museum, where actually the majority of things we know remarkably little about. They were a private collection, 400 objects, many of which were bought online or through dealerships in Europe, where there was actually very little information about how those objects had got from Africa or Oceania, where they're from to the market. And many museums would simply say "well, we can't possibly engage with these things." You know, "we can't establish their provenance. It's not ethical to accept them". One of our starting points for this workshop was to think about, well, what are the ethical implications of refusing such a collection? You know, will they go back onto the art market? What will happen to them? Is it unethical not to accept them, you know? And this throws us into this space of uncertainty. What's the right thing to do? And for us to understand that ethics isn't really just a checklist on an ethical code, but it's actually a process. You know, most ethicists would argue this, that ethics is actually about a conversation, of bringing different voices, different perspectives together around a problem to figure out, you know, what should be the kind of the ethical kind of procedure, what's, what's, what's the right thing to do. And so I think as an experiment, really, MUDEC is kind of beginning to think in this way about this particular collection. Could we use it actually to raise a much broader problem that many museums face? What do they do when they're offered this kind of a collection? You know, should they simply refuse it, or should they actually say, well, no, let's think about the process through which we can decide through consultation with lots of different stakeholders, as it were, what's the right thing to do? So we've spent, you know, two days, really thrashing out some of these complexities.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': If it was you, the curator, for this new collection, what would be the main ethical concern for you?

Paul Basu: I think there's a bundle of ethical concerns. You know, there's not a singular issue, because in some cases there has been a kind of an established provenance that actually the collector themselves did with the particular object. That object doesn't, isn't, is therefore not immune from the ethical problems. They just shift slightly because that raises further questions about, well, just how we, in this case, we know where the object came from, but we don't know the circumstances in which it was collected. So the ethics slightly shift. Whereas if we're thinking about, objects where we simply know that they were acquired off the internet, for instance, then we can't even establish that: the status of the object is uncertain. You know, were they made for the market? In which case an object might have a very different kind of ethical status. Were they part of a kind of a ritual practice and somehow

extracted from a community in a more violent kind of a way? And sometimes it's difficult to even tell which is the case. Some, what's sometimes called a kind of tourist art, is very evidently not a kind of, you know, again, inverted commas, an authentic ritual object. It may have been made for the market, but sometimes by just looking at a thing and examining it, you can't actually tell because the people, the artists that make these things for the market know that to add value, they give the appearance that this is actually a kind of a ritual type of object.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': So how can ethnographic collections be reanimated or transformed in the 21st century? Is contemporary art a solution?

Paul Basu: Yeah, I mean, this is a typical approach, particularly with historical collections, historical anthropological collections, is to, you know, bring them into conversation with contemporary art, often from artists from the source communities, sometimes said so, people who are from that kind of cultural context. I think though there are multiple ways to do that. And again, it goes back to, well, what, what is an exhibition? What is the point of it? Is it just about kind of, you know, describing a particular group or context in some place? I think probably, you know, television and film has replaced that method as a, as a kind of way of engaging or learning about other places. So I'd say it depends very much on the kinds of questions that one's exploring. A lot of my own work has been about returning photographs, sound recordings, photos of objects and other, other ethnographic materials from maybe 100 years ago to those same places where they came from. And then indeed with communities, with artists, with other stakeholders in the locality, you know, gathering more material, that could be comments about the material, it could be new work and so on. And then bringing those together in exhibitions, both in those places themselves. You know, in West Africa where I work or indeed in, in a European context. So that you, you know, you revisit those historical collections with a different lens, as it were, and bringing in those different perspectives.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': So one last question for you, in recent years, there has been much discussion about artwashing, especially concerning former colonial and ethnographic museums. Is it something that you have observed yourself and what are your thoughts on it?

Paul Basu: Yeah, definitely. I think this is a kind of a strategy that many museums kind of revert to. I mean, my understanding of artwashing really is where in some sense is a museum kind of devolves responsibility, as it were, for asking difficult

questions by putting the onus on artists. You know, they're commissioning new artists, contemporary artists to create work in response to historical collections for instance, or difficult questions so that the, the artists doing the work, as it were, of the museum for them, you could say. And you know, sometimes, of course, it's a really effective strategy because, of course, artists can ask different questions and different kinds of ways. But at the same time, you know, I think the onus is on curators to use their skills also and their, you know, the courage to say no, we need to actually deal with these questions in other kinds of ways, perhaps more explicitly, you know. The advantage of art, of course, is that, one, the museum can say, well, this is the artist's vision, it's not ours, you know, they're kind of, you know, they have their right to artistic expression. So there's a way of distancing from the kind of responses that an artist might give. But, you know, there are other strategies that curators could do where it's a bit more explicit. This is the museum's perspective on this. This is the curatorial angle on this. And to actually deal with that responsibility themselves. So yes, it can be a technique of avoiding responsibility. It can also be, you know, to put it crudely a cost effective way of doing that, because to invest in fieldwork, for instance, going to these places where the things were originally collected and so on, creating a research project effectively around them, is an extremely, you know, expensive thing to do. But I think the, you know, in the cases where it can be done, the kinds of complexity and the breadth of the responses is much more interesting.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau': Thank you very much, Paul. It was very nice having you. And thank you for helping us unpack some of the issues that revolve around ethnographic museums in the contemporary.

Paul Basu: It's been a pleasure.

Oltre la vetrina – Beyond the Showcase is podcast series from MUDEC, and is produced with the support of Chora Media.

It is written by me, Marina Pugliese, with support from Bianca Aravecchia, Sara Chiesa, Alessandra Cecchinato and Marcos Aurelio Da Costa.

In the editorial staff of Chora, Francesca Bottenghi and Chiara Gregoretti.

Editorial curation is by Sara Poma.

Sound and music supervision by Luca Micheli.

Post production and sound design are by Emanuele Moscatelli.

The project manager is Monia Donati. The producer is Alex Peverengo.

Studio recordings are by Luca Possi.