

De-Colonizing Art Institutions

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Decolonising UK World Art Institutions, 1945–1980

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Decolonising UK World Art Institutions, 1945-1980

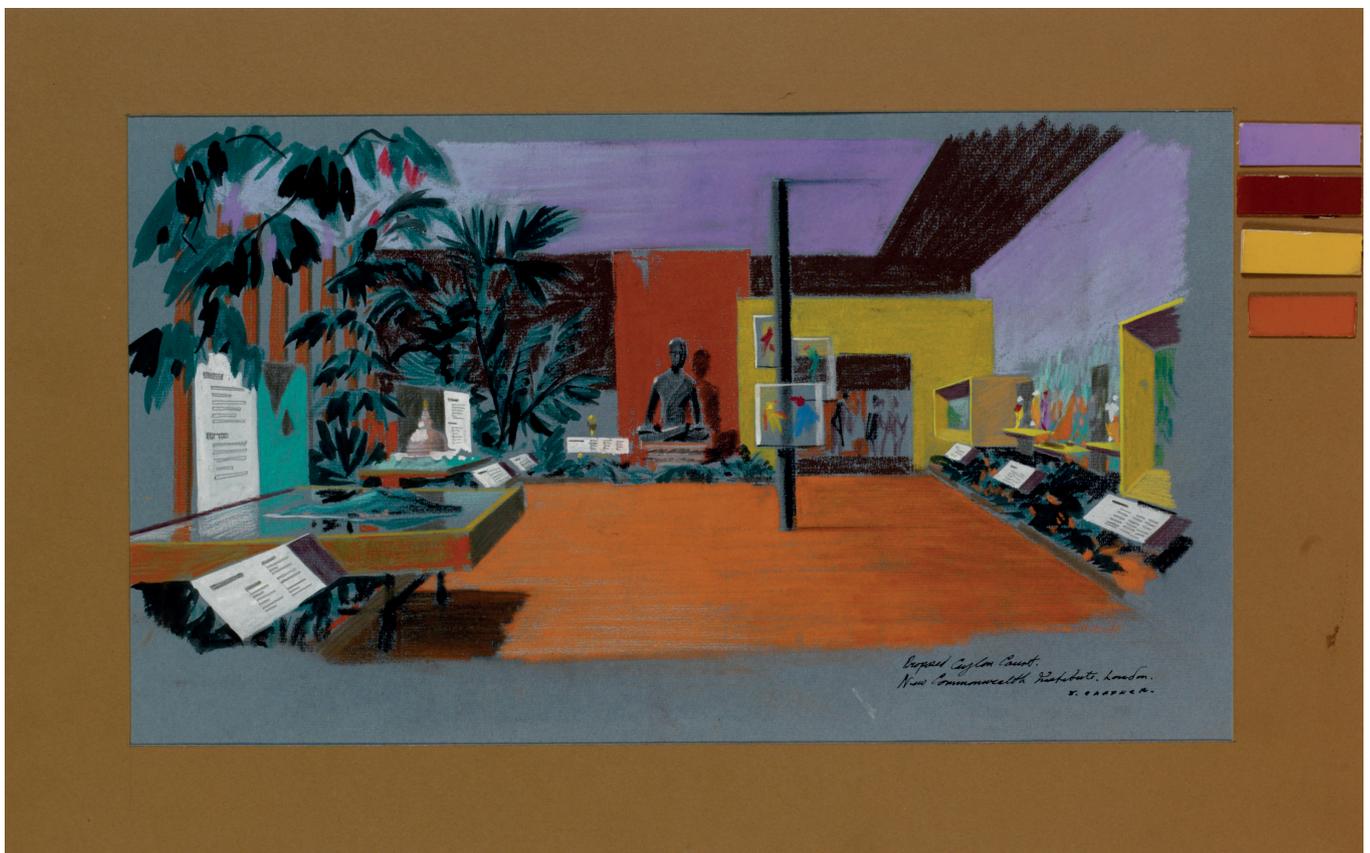
Claire Wintle

Between 1945 and 1980, UK museums and their collections of art and artefacts from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas played an active political and social role in decolonising the British Empire. As spaces which forced museum practitioners and visitors to contend with the material remnants of empire, and as arenas which demanded the redisplay of a world undergoing rapid political change, in their very materiality, UK museums of world art and anthropology supported the trialling and enacting of forms of decolonisation, neo-colonialism, independence and anti-colonial resistance. They acted as microcosms of wider political encounters.

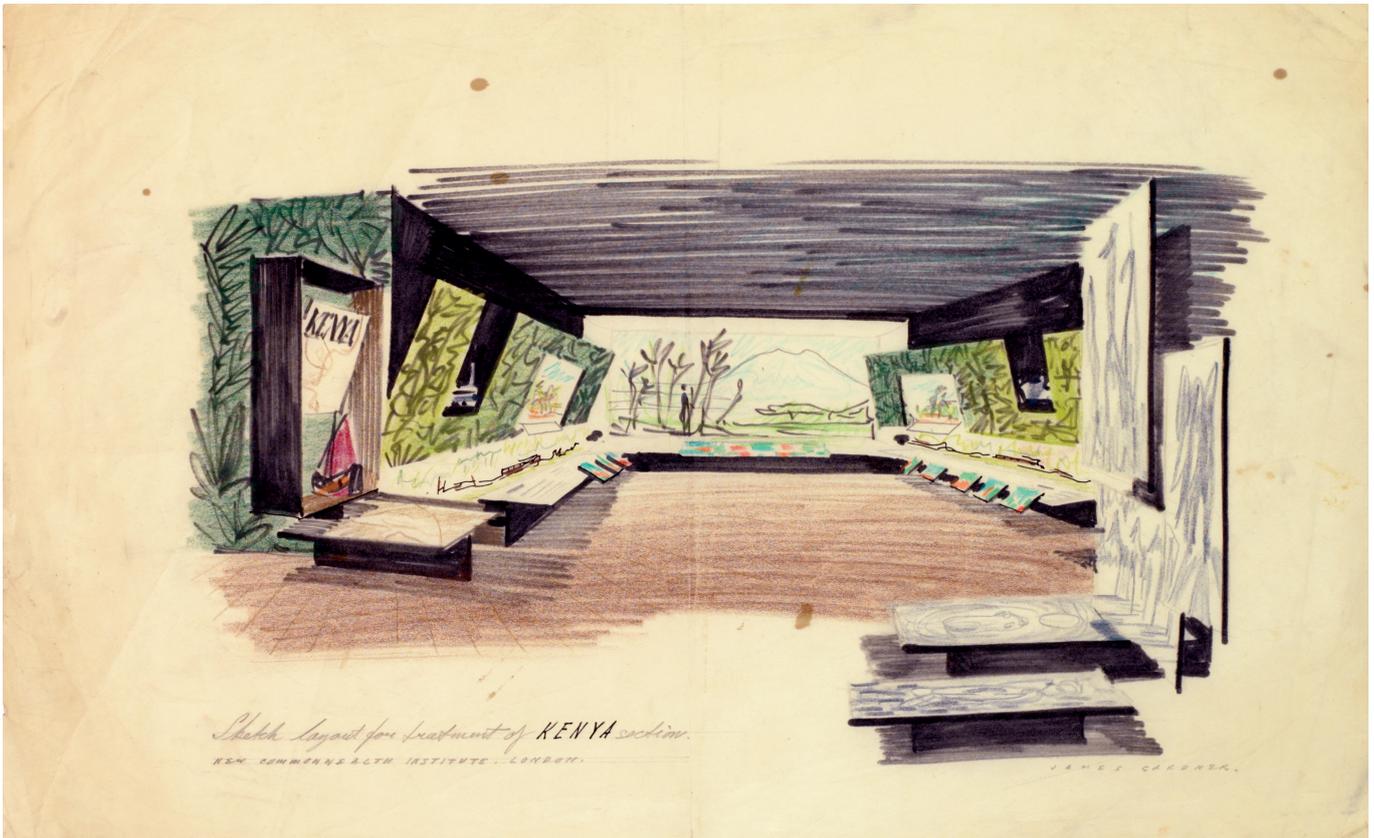
While pre-1945 and post-1980 UK museum practice and world cultures collections are relatively well researched, attention to the intervening years has been minimal and limited to individual institutions. One assumption, often

emphasising stagnant display practices, is that museums with world cultures collections were 'scenes of neglect' (Karp, 1991: 378). In 1987, in his summary of the mid-century period, broadcaster and author Kenneth Hudson (1987: vii) wrote that such organisations 'may collect widely, but they do not dig deeply. The political consequences of doing so would be too serious, or so it is felt'. But while the particular political consequences of world art museum practice may sometimes have been buried, they were also emphasised and exploited in important ways.

Indeed, while some museum displays remained neglected in this period, behind the scenes, UK world art institutions were dynamic spaces, grappling with professionalisation in the sector, addressing new disciplinary shifts in art history and anthropology, and attempting to manage the demands of the former colonies. While in some



In the process of sketching the new displays of an independent Ceylon, how did designer James Gardner's perspectives change? Sketch for general layout of proposed Ceylon court, Commonwealth Institute. James Gardner, c.1961. Catalogue number: DES-LJG-3-3-2-18. James Gardner Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives.



How did the choices required in the framing of a colony in turmoil shape designers' understandings of decolonisation? Sketch for general layout of proposed Kenya section, Commonwealth Institute. James Gardner, c.1961. Catalogue number: DES-LJG-3-3-2-31. James Gardner Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives.

ways this was a deeply conservative moment in museum practice, in certain activities, the foundations of some of today's best, 'decolonised' museum practice can be found.

There were cases where British museum practice acted as a foil for progressive political change elsewhere. Collections acquired through colonial frameworks did continue to pour into museum collections as if Britain still ruled its subjects: when colonial officials returned to the UK after independence, many donated the collections they had acquired during their careers. There is also a pattern of returnees retraining and taking on curatorial posts in the UK. In some instances, smaller institutions disavowed their imperial histories. They transferred their ethnographic material to other institutions as they turned instead to local history, assuming that 'local', 'British' history did not include the 'other'. At the same time, the larger, more specialist museums that accepted these transfers cemented the colonial legacy that these collections evoked. In

some senses, museums acted as devices through which those involved could retain their former imperial identities and imagine a future where Britain still reigned supreme.

Yet we also see an early embracing of more collaborative, egalitarian museum practices in this period: for example, national and university museums worked with and hosted placements for museum professionals from decolonising nations. Training and 'sharing' expertise can of course be cast, rightly, in a paternalistic light, but decolonising countries were also able to make their mark on UK museum practice: there are several examples where requests for the return of sacred objects were successful; museums across the UK also received collections gifted by newly independent governments in exchanges which can be characterised as part of a changing, more equitable political relationship, and based on former colonies' self-confident global status following independence. Diplomats, artists and scholars from former colonies also worked with

UK curators to present their countries to British audiences in collaborations that were not truly equal, but represent greater social shifts towards cultural, economic and political parity than are sometimes associated with this period. Indeed, in some institutions, the demands of former colonial subjects forced curators to deal with the political consequences of the 'end' of empire more quickly than they might have hoped. In one extreme example, the director of the Commonwealth Institute in London was forced to express his exhaustion over the constant pressure on his team from individual governments who wished to see their countries represented in his galleries in an up-to-date fashion.

Projecting the macropolitics of global change on the micropolitics of the museum tells us much about the broader role of museums historically and today. Museums mirror political change, but they are also more active than this. They help practitioners and audiences manage, trial, disavow and embrace geopolitical shifts. In some unusual cases like the Commonwealth Institute, which forged formal financial agreements with commonwealth countries in return for their representation, organisational and funding structures pushed museum practitioners to acknowledge decolonisation, forcing them to take decolonising nations seriously as stakeholders and collaborators. More typically, it was the material presence of imperialism that museums had to contend with: there were simply so many remnants of empire, that they could not be ignored, even in the short term. They had to be confronted: hidden, exchanged, accepted, described, interpreted, displayed and – in exceptional cases – repatriated. Objects were a point of concern, contact and disagreement between emerging nations and the former metropole. It was the tangible and the material that forced museum staff members to conceive of and respond to a changing world, even if that process included denial and tentative assent as well as enthusiastic acceptance.

Working at the interface of politics and museum practice also allows us to rethink the political

moment itself: shedding light on mid-century museum practice and the role of newly independent nations in the British sector forces us to acknowledge that the 'end' of empire was not simply driven from the metropole, either at the museum or on a geopolitical level. Actors in the global South were agents too. We also see an eagerness *and* reticence in UK art institutions in the mid-twentieth century to engage with changing political circumstances: decolonisation, we are reminded, is both a forward-looking *and* conservative process. The intersection between the disciplines of history and curating therefore calls for a more nuanced use of terminology. While historians describe 'decolonisation' as a mid-century moment and as a tentative, incomplete, even neo-imperial process that occurred in fits and starts, in museum and art gallery studies and practice, the term 'decolonisation' is used to refer to an eradication of imperialism from contemporary cultural institutions. Perhaps a realignment of these terms is required: 'decolonising the art institution' is a current, worthy aim, but in our bid to eliminate the deepest forms of colonial legacy, we might also acknowledge the more conservative, neo-colonial tendencies inherent in any form of 'decolonisation', in order to expunge those too.

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