

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

Hope in Solidarity: Building Trust Towards Cultural Care and Repair

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

An academic foresight paper exploring a future in which museums can be part of a process of societal healing by enabling community-led work towards reconciliation and prioritizing listening, cultural care, and epistemological equity.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).


INTRODUCTION

I want to use this contribution to reflect on recent work at the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM), one of Oxford University's four museums, which is helping us to redefine how we care for ancestral remains and cultural objects in ways that **prioritize cultural care** over preservation care and **aim for epistemological equity**, where we look to ensure we respect different ways of knowing in equitable ways instead of solely prioritizing Eurocentric or academic ways of knowing (such as historical documents or a collector's notes as provenance information). This paradigmatic shift is being developed as part of an iterative process of reprioritizing the ways that we curate and care and acknowledging the coloniality of the legacy we steward and the responsibility for the work of redress that this comes with.

While for many members of the public the PRM is their “all-time favorite museum” and Oxford's “hidden gem,” in the eyes of others—students and community partners in particular—it remains an unchanging place complicit in centuries of colonial harm.¹ This is partly because of the way the collections have been accumulated over the years, and partly due to the visual aspects of its Grade I listed architecture (a UK historic designation denoting it of “exceptional special interest”) and layout reminiscent of Victorian times. On the other hand, several times a year, British conservative press will raise red flags claiming current work is changing the museum too rapidly or radically, because the concepts we use are too “woke,” or objects are being “hidden” and legacies “slandered.”


The PRM is not alone in this; many museums with so-called “ethnographic” collections (usually of anthropology and archaeology) face similar challenges. How to curate, care for, and activate this material manifestation of a continued colonial past that lingers both in our current-day operations (including displays, budget, and staff composition) and in the mindsets of our many visitors? As museum directors and senior management, we are often asked what our vision for change might be. What might we do to be more relevant, more active, more strategic? That is what I want to reflect on in this piece, asking if by working alongside Indigenous peoples we can seek to build different futures where collaboratively reimagined spaces could become places for societal healing enabled through community-led work, prioritizing listening over broadcasting, cultural care over preservation care, and epistemological equity over continued colonial bureaucracy.

In her seminal book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith outlines her proposal for an Indigenous research agenda, synthesizing different strands and foci unleashed through a decades-long social movement of Indigenous peoples around the world—including New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the USA, and Scandinavia—that




ran parallel to other global civil rights movements. Smith identifies four processes that define the Indigenous research agenda: mobilization (on a local, regional, national, and international level), decolonization, healing, and transformation (on psychological, social, political, spiritual, economic, physical, and collective fronts). In her model, these processes form a matrix with four tides: survival, recovery, development, and self-determination, which she describes as “the conditions and states of being through which indigenous communities are moving. It is not sequential development—the survival of peoples as physical beings, of languages, of social and spiritual practices, of social relations, and of the arts are all subject to some basic prioritizing.” (Smith 2012, 120-121).

As will become clear further along in this text, in our work with stakeholders, it is exactly these desires for healing, transformation, mobilization, and decolonization—alongside the underlying needs for recovery, development, and survival through self-determination and self-representation—that drive the projects described below. The fact that Linda’s book and her fifty-year-spanning career still resonates so strongly is both a testament to her academic insightfulness and an illustration of the slow, sluggish pace of change in the academic and museum sector. Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor (2024) remind us that deliberate, intentional, and long-term investment is required for decolonization efforts to succeed, and that lasting system change only happens when it is done as part of a *movement* where community representatives, activists, artists, and institutional representatives can work alongside each other despite the many differences that divide them: “Transformative solidarity...names the actions of exploited and marginalized groups as they come together to build power, but it also involves people who are not themselves the direct targets of oppression, who choose to join the struggle for justice nevertheless.” (Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor, 2024:xxi). Can stewarding institutions—like (university) museums, libraries, and archives—be those partners? What role might ethnographic museums like the PRM be able to play when standing in solidarity with Indigenous-led movements of change?



Without wanting to deny the continued, deep-rooted, broad, and systemic inequities of our time—many rooted in colonial times—in this contribution I want to share some glimpses of hope from our own practice. Over the past decade, we have started collaborative work that prioritizes listening to, and ceding authority to, stakeholders far removed from the museum’s physical locations whose heritage lies in our stores or is on display in our galleries. And, taking Smith’s (2012 [1999]), Mie Inouye’s (2023), and Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor’s (2024) recent writings on board, we have begun to ask if prioritizing **solidarity** with the needs, timeframes, and cultural practices of grassroots Indigenous organizers and originating communities over our institutional agendas might help steer museums like ours in directions unimagined (by us, at least) and




full of purpose, creative endeavor, hope, and boundless possibilities instead of endless limitations.

GOOD CARE

As previously mentioned, accumulated in the galleries and stores of ethnographic museums like the PRM lie hundreds of thousands of objects that curators, academics, colonial officers, and other enthusiasts felt entitled to collect so they could be preserved for eternity. When in a 2021 nationwide survey we asked the UK public what the most important role of museums was, “preserve and *take good care* of historical objects” (emphasis added) like these scored highest by far. However, as the work we have been doing with Indigenous experts, makers, knowledge-keepers, and elders has revealed, what is considered “good care” by some does not necessarily equal good care in the eyes of others. Despite increasing efforts by the professional conservation field to critically reflect on the underlying colonial paradigms of its practices (e.g., Clavir 2002, Sully 2007, and Sweetnam & Henderson 2022), the multifaceted matrix of values involved in care and its implicit sociocultural responsibility (Bracker and Richmond 2009), and most recently the need for prioritizing people and caring through ethical decision-making (Owczarek 2023), it remains true that when museums and their European publics think about care, this usually refers to *preservation* care. Large sums of money are invested in building collection stores that can hold the accumulated heritage, with the required environmental conditions and security measures in place that keep all pests, mold, and other unwanted intruders out. Are we, however, also prepared to start investing in *cultural care*?

What do I mean by that? Community members we work with envision something entirely different than us when they talk of *good care*: their ways of knowing (epistemologies) and ways of being (ontologies) require another concept. To their originating makers and users, many objects in our collections are more than merely things. They are considered to be alive, to have agency, to breathe and feel. For many, these objects *are* ancestors, living entities that need care in other forms than preservation: they need to be held, played (in the case of musical instruments), sang to, fed, worn (such as in the case of feather headdresses or clothing), or otherwise awakened and put back into use. These objects, that are ancestors, were never meant to be preserved, owned, or kept in boxes, behind glass, or in humidity-controlled environments. They may need to return home, or be reburied, or left to decay. This may sound alien to those of us that have come to objectify the material world we live in, but on the other hand—as Bruno Latour (2011) has argued in *We Have Never Been Modern*—there are parallels in Western cultures, such as how we may view the family heirlooms we inherit, feeling the presence of our lost loved ones through and in the




objects. To understand how to care for these objects, these belongings, these ancestors, requires engagement that goes beyond the administration of professional practices of care or gathering of academic knowledge alone. It needs us to accept that the best way of caring and understanding will be in bringing together our ways of knowing and being on equitable footing to work towards **epistemological equity** that can guide our ways of caring.

For some (emeritus professors and journalists mostly), to suggest that we should look for epistemological equity and prioritize cultural care over merely preservation care is like heresy (e.g., Kuper 2023, 315 & 348; [Murray](#) 2022; and [Weiss](#) 2024). And yet, most Indigenous cultural experts feel strongly that the best possible care for some objects is to put them back into ritual or domestic use or even leave them to decay. In some cases, this requires repatriation; in others, it requires our participation as staff members in healing ceremonies or performance work that re-activates the museums' collections and relationships; in other cases, it means new collecting in innovative and equitable ways.

SOLIDARITY IN AND THROUGH BUILDING PRACTICE TOGETHER

Museums have been doing decolonization work for a while, and some have been at the forefront of enabling considerable shifts in the sector (such as Te Papa in Wellington, New Zealand; the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC; the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine; and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver). Likewise, many communally led museums and tribal, cultural, and heritage centers have successfully been established in recent decades that challenge the usual boundaries of the heritage sector. However, the largest collection-holding institutions have moved only marginally towards reconsiderations of ownership, representation, or care, and descendant movements continue to butt up against (concrete and conceptual) walls that seem to hardly become more permeable. When challenged, these institutions tend to fall back on their policy frameworks as unchangeable guidelines, forcing communities of origin to work within colonial conceptualizations instead of inviting them to share other possible possibilities, new reimaginings. Might university museums that steward ethnographic collections—and often have very close relationships with anthropologists, historians, geographers, and archaeologists who have been closely involved in developing new theoretical and hermeneutical methods of work that focus on collaboration and joint research projects—play a leading role in this?




The PRM has been a key player in co-designing new museum practices in collaboration with Indigenous peoples. Work developed in the 1990s and early 2000s by Laura Peers with the Haida in Haida Gwaii in Canada (Krpmotich and Peers 2013; Peers 2019), by Clare Harris with Tibetan communities in Tibet, the UK, and India (Harris 2012, 2013a, 2013b), and by Christopher Morton with the Luo in Kenya (Morton and Oteyo 2015a), with Christian Thompson (Morton 2019) and descendant communities in West and South Australia (Morton 2015b), and with the Bayaka in the DRC are excellent examples of the leading role the PRM has played activating collections with originating communities in innovative, collaborative ways. While continuing to build on these long-standing relationships, more recent collaborations with Indigenous peoples from across the world, including Siberia, Tibet, Hokkaido, Nagaland, Kenya, Tanzania, Amazonas, and Hawai'i, have given us the opportunity to significantly broaden and deepen our scope of work and ensure our projects are focused on prioritizing the needs of the community of care and repair. The latter is the focus of this contribution, but it deeply intersects with our collaborative work with local communities as communities of practice, including academics, artists, and especially those with lived experience.

I want to illustrate this with our learnings throughout four multi-year projects led by different grassroots activists, scholars, and Indigenous organizations from originating communities, located in widely divergent parts of the world. Naga, Evenki, Shuar, and Maasai delegates from Highland Nagaland in Northeast India, Arctic Evenkia in Russian Siberia, Amazonian Ecuador, and sub-Saharan Kenya and Tanzania, respectively, have worked alongside PRM staff as part of an iterative process of listening, adapting, and doing. These recent projects have given us the opportunity to significantly broaden and deepen the scope of work co-designing new museum practices in collaboration with Indigenous peoples, aiming for community-led reconciliation and healing rather than relying mostly on more established practices of representation (co-curated exhibitions) or standard repatriation that is enabled through legal or institutional frameworks (which we also do). Each **partnership** offers different perspectives, as each community lives its own complex contemporary geopolitical and ecological reality, but also charts commonalities where cultural care, ritual, craft, and art have been important pathways toward redress, repatriation, and/or reconciliation.



NAGA PATHWAYS HOME

In 2020, we decided to deinstall the human remains on display in the museum, attracting global media attention from more than 450 media outlets. As the news traveled, Professor Dolly Kikon from the University of Melbourne reached out, pleased that we had taken her Naga ancestors off display, and offered to connect us with community elders to start the process of bringing the ancestors home. This began




the “Pathways Home” project focusing on the Naga collections at the PRM (which houses the largest such collection in the world, including many human remains). The project transcended conventional legal frameworks, addressing the cultural and spiritual significance of the remains, taking a discursive Naga-led approach sensitive to Nagaland’s complex colonial history and its current political context focused on listening, communicating, peace-building, and reconciliation.

As a crucial step in the process, we set up a Naga research team, Recover Restore and Decolonise (RRaD), to approach the topic sensitively. Meetings with tribal leaders and extensive work with media partner Morung Express ensured statewide dissemination and inclusion of the many stakeholders. It was clear that a novel approach was required for this project, rather than one duplicated from a settler colonial context, as principal investigator, University of Edinburgh Professor Arkotong Longkumer noted at a 2022 conference in Dimapur. From 2021 to 2024, RRaD organized meetings with tribal representatives from India (Nagaland and Assam) and Myanmar. The team organized intergenerational dialogues and public gatherings, and developed and disseminated materials for outreach, including videos, a website, a graphic novel, and media articles that have been fervently shared through social media and local media. The largest tribes expressed a collective desire for repatriation and a visit to the museum to identify pathways that can help resolve some of the conundrums faced by contemporary Naga due to the historical processes of colonization, Christianization, and subsequent incorporation in the Indian nation state. Traditional Naga rituals have largely been replaced by Christian ones, cultural self-determination is not guaranteed, and infrastructure is limited. The team selected elders to advise on next steps that support reconciliation.

MAASAI LIVING CULTURES PROJECT

The Maasai Living Cultures Project is a collaboration between the Maasai community and the PRM to address concerns about the presence and representation of Maasai cultural items in the museum’s stewardship. The project began in 2017, when Maasai human rights activist Samwel Nangiria identified objects of inheritance while visiting the PRM as part of an NGO-organized leadership training program. Subsequently, the museum invited several Maasai delegations, with representatives from Kenya and Tanzania, to identify which objects needed redress and better documentation. None of the objects they identified had ever been on display or researched, and they had only sparse historical documentation. Further guidance from Maasai spiritual leadership included advice from Laibon Mokompo Ole Parit and Laibon Lemaron Ole Parit to work with UK museums. The work concluded in a series of reconciliatory Elaata OoNgiro ceremonies—rare, sacred proceedings which help reestablish relationships and rebuild



trust after a violent death between two clans—held in the summer of 2023 across four different locations in Kenya and Tanzania.

The project has had many outcomes, including establishing the Pan-African Living Cultures Alliance (PALCA), a local-based NGO that aims to inspire more Indigenous peoples to engage in advocacy around cultural rights based on Indigenous knowledge. The most significant outcome is the reestablishment of the Orkiaama, the council of Maasai elders banned by British colonial forces in 1919. Now, it is a strategic force for Maasai landownership, cultural rights, and strategic advocacy for unity (see also Van Broekhoven 2024a and <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/maasai-living-cultures-2023>).

WANDERING IN EVENKI WORLDS

Wandering in Other Worlds is a project of Russian artist Anya Gleizer, Evenki choreographer Galina Veretnova, and Evenki professor Alexander Varlamov, along with PRM staff. It began in response to a 1915 collection of objects by anthropologist Marie Czaplicka, which the project leads established had been collected without community consent. Therefore, they felt that a display in the museum focusing on Czaplicka's life and work as an "intrepid woman" collector wasn't appropriate and should be refurbished to showcase Evenki worlds and knowledge systems. Among the objects in the collection were two wooden figures taken from the grave of Evenki shaman Nakte, which particularly troubled our partners due to their spiritual power. To address concerns about the ongoing harm caused by the displacement of spiritual objects through extractive anthropological methodologies, Galina and Anya choreographed a reconciliation ritual, based on the Evenki bear-hunting ritual, which eight inducted PRM staff performed in October 2022. This was the first time non-Evenki people had participated in a similar ritual, and the first time it was adapted to be performed in a museum.

The project grew organically over time, beginning with several research trips where Anya and then-PhD-student Janika Vider traveled to Evenkia to share pictures of the collections, and eventually spawning virtual sessions, 360-degree films, a feature film, a new display, an artist residency, and reconciliation ceremonies. In collaborating with the Evenki, the team learned it was important to them that the museum displayed objects related to their cosmology and shamanic traditions throughout, and that all work prioritized self-representation alongside the wellbeing of museum staff, whom Evenki considered to be endangered by the illicit taking of the objects from the grave (see also <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/wandering-in-other-worlds>).

PROYECTO SHUAR TSANTSAS

In 2017, the PRM started a partnership project called Proyecto Tsantsa with the Universidad de San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador (USFQ), Museo Pumapungo, Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural (INPC), and the different Shuar federations of Amazonas, Ecuador. Following several years of working together, representatives of five Shuar federations encompassing 180,000 community members signed agreements in April and July 2023. Since then, the project has focused on building trusting relationships and collaborative, multi-disciplinary networks of archaeologists, anthropologists, museum professionals, and biologists to work alongside Shuar delegates.

Among the key outcomes of the project has been uncovering important incongruences between accepted anthropological theories about the making of *tsantsa* shrunken heads (which have contributed to stereotypical representations in literature and museums) and the evidence gathered from ancient DNA research, CT scanning, provenance research, and Shuar oral history and memory. It has also identified structural issues with past museum efforts to engage the community. For example, although several stewarding institutions have felt that their responsibility starts (and ends?) with returning the *tsantsa*, arguably this act does not support the communities of origin, as usually the return has been to Ecuadorian stewarding institutions (the INPC). The project team also flagged issues such as lack of institutional representation, financing for Shuar-run local museums, and entanglements with destructive mining companies as important factors in why the Shuar federations have been disengaged and lacked options that allow for self-determination and revitalization in the past. In discussions, the federations voiced their wishes to continue working alongside international stewarding institutions to find more equitable, self-determined ways of representation; to identify in which stewarding institutions *tsantsa* are held (PRM has since started mapping the presence of *tsantsa* in museum collections globally); to come to agreements on future care and potential returns for the *tsantsa*; and to determine what involvement in curatorial processes would be required going forward (see also Van Broekhoven 2024b and Baquero Mendez 2021). For the Shuar, it is important to stay represented in museums globally, but not if it leads to stereotypes (as is currently the case). The federations have ambitious plans to build their own museums that showcase all aspects of their culture—including music, dance, and food—and to write their own chapters on the history of the *tsantsas*.




RECONCILIATION, REPATRIATION, AND HEALING AS GOOD CARE

As is clear from the summary of these projects, much of the work involved was entirely led by the originating communities, which requires institutions to prioritize listening over broadcasting. However, we are not generally trained or encouraged to do that, as sector standards usually expect us to act as knowledgeable “experts” rather than supportive facilitators who listen more than speak. To start building towards ways of working that prioritize the views of communities of origin over our own views, strategies, and ways of caring, we need to work alongside those communities to reimagine cultural care *beyond* preservation. Although preservation is important to ensure the physical conservation of an object according to established sector standards, we must accept that it is not always the *best possible* care for objects that were made, shaped, and conceived in widely divergent cultural contexts and philosophies.

In working with Naga, Maasai, Evenki, and Shuar communities, we learned that the cultural care they are seeking from us as stewarding institutions is healing—societal, relational, psychological, and physical healing. Their main concerns are the wellbeing of the ancestors, of the objects, of their families, of their communities, and more broadly, of our planet and of their people. The wellbeing of the museum and our staff are also always an important consideration. These considerations help us, as stewarding institutions, to start thinking about what we should prioritize: providing access to the collections under our care; returning objects so they can go back into use, be reburied, or otherwise follow their intended cultural destiny; taking part in or providing support for reconciliation ceremonies to take place in the museum as required; and advising on or supporting the restoration of objects to look as representative as possible, depending on the needs of the community. Rather than relying solely on legal or institutional frameworks and claim-based reactive models, the focus of our joint work can shift to establishing trust, supporting the agency of originating communities, and allowing for conversations that are intergenerational and allow delving into the implications and changes triggered by a possible repatriation on the ground. (For example, the potential need for setting up community support systems and adapting or developing new or traditional rituals, as in the case of the Naga and Maasai project.)

In the USA, the 2024 changes to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) now require museums to see free, prior, and informed consent as part of their “duty of care,” to prevent preservation care causing “unintended harm,” and to ensure traditional knowledge underpins their care. Given that these changes were only recently implemented, it is unclear how they will impact practice. Will they inspire stewarding institutions (both in the USA and internationally) to build




new practices of care together, or will they lead to paralysis, with museums struggling to understand how these fundamentally new approaches to care can be implemented and therefore keep from moving forward? Internationally, much repatriation practice is approached from an institutional bureaucratic or nation-state-to-nation-state approach, which can reduce the originating communities themselves to passive onlookers, each case interchangeable and bureaucratized in procedural steps instead of mutual and iterative labor seeking solutions through joint, collaborative learning. With no control over the process, affected communities and museum workers become alienated from their own work and the outcomes the process may produce, instead of invested in its creative and potentially healing outcomes. While policy-making and procedures are important, experience of practice-making shows the importance of self-determination and control over the process by the communities in question, and bureaucratized practices are the opposite of that.

One of the common denominators of the projects we have been involved in at the PRM has been that, while the process has been more important than the outcome from the outset, the outcome has been much bigger than just the care for historical objects. It has extended to care for people (including each other), organizational change in the museum, and societal healing at large. Although media and public opinions tend to focus on physical repatriation, it is our experience that the needs of the affected communities are much more diverse than just objects long gone from the community coming back. In other words: not all communities want repatriation as the outcome of a collaboration. Some want repair or reconciliation, to build a relationship, or to ensure the ways they are being represented in the museum change. Some may be interested in skills transfer or research partnerships, or all of the above once a relationship of trust has been established. In following these diverse needs, several of the projects have outperformed our expectations of impact by ten or a hundred fold. The reestablishment of the Orkiaama impacts 2.1 million Maasai; the dialogues in Nagaland concern 2.5 million Naga; the Shuar federations that have signed the MoU with PRM and the Universidad de San Francisco represent 180,000 Shuar. Geopolitical situations affected the development of all the projects, but probably most prominently the war on Ukraine by Russia, which made participation by Evenki experts and outreach to constituencies difficult, and concerned Galina's family members for her personal safety when she needed—in their propaganda-informed minds—to “cross enemy lines.”

WHAT'S OUR ROLE?

Although activists and commentators sometimes argue that museums like ours should just close our doors and return all objects or take them all off display, in our experience, that is usually not what originating communities are asking for. It is, in fact, the opposite



of what they are asking for. Communities want to see accountability and justice; they want to be seen, not erased. But in the work of memorialization and representation that museums know so excellently how to do, the most important request from communities is for self-representation from the point of view of self-determination. In the wise words of feminist poet Audre Lorde: “What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities.”² Despite the wrongdoings of the past, our future lies in fighting together, as Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor propose:

Without a doubt, building bridges of solidarity requires patience—it’s much easier to draw lines, pass judgment, point fingers, and place blame. But the reality is, none of us are perfectly pure or enlightened; we are all implicated, to varying degrees, in oppressive systems, and hopefully we evolve as we learn. One way to fight a profit-driven system that treats people as disposable is to instead treat people as redeemable. Solidarity means not writing anyone off completely, not throwing anyone away. It holds out hope that systems and individuals can change. (Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor, 2024:xxxiv).


So, are ethnographic and university museums redeemable? And, if so, what role might those of us at the helm of these institutions today play in finding solidarity with those to whom we hold a responsibility, an obligation, or a kind of social duty³ or communal debt?⁴

Engaging actively in Indigenous-(co)designed and -led multi-year, multi-disciplinary projects with partners from different parts of the globe may help in rehabilitating the idea of the museum, reimagining it as place of radical hope that can serve as a hub for international and intergenerational coalition-building and the development of collaborative practices of care that are aligned with the cultural needs of the objects in question. These projects may also support coalition-building by bringing in networks, connecting communities, assisting with philanthropic fundraising, and promoting memorialization and visibility through a lens of self-representation and co-curation.



IN THE FUTURE


The case studies presented above suggest how museums might shift their internal culture and external behaviors to prioritize cultural care and create the conditions for epistemological equity, respecting each other’s different ways of knowing, being, and coping. This shift can begin by recognizing that stewarding collections conceived within entirely different worldviews from those that govern the museum sector—and often removed without consent or under duress—comes with a great responsibility of care.



The colonial history of these collections, and the ways in which much collecting was conducted in colonial times, presents museums with both challenges and opportunities.

In the present, museums invest considerable time and energy into providing the best imaginable care for what we call “objects,” putting them behind glass, boxing them up wrapped in acid-free paper, or building new, expensive storage spaces for them with meters-high racking. In the future, museums should instead be guided by what originating communities identify as appropriate care for what they might call “belongings” and for ancestral remains. This will mean investing in a paradigm where cultural care is as important as preservation care. Rather than spending millions on new buildings, cases, permanent galleries, or temporary exhibitions, this would mean prioritizing support for cultural care, song, ritual, and relationship-building, especially with Indigenous experts and those with lived experience who can identify what that care should look like.

In their article “How Much Discomfort Is the Whole World Worth?,” Hayes and Kaba (2023) remind us of what is at stake. Although our capitalist system is built to ensure only some have power while others don’t, in the case of museums there is potential for redemption. In the future, we can acknowledge that underlying our ways of thinking about ownership, care, and representation is problematic colonialist logic that can be reimaged. We can recognize that objects aren’t just things to be possessed or dispossessed, that knowledge is multiple and can be respected and understood together, with an openness to share and change that takes into account local needs and truths. Trust in each other’s skills, knowledge, and understanding is paramount to respect and enables imaginative collaboration that can go beyond our preconceived standards and conceptions. Museums can be open to unlearning and undoing and make space for new ideas rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and being that offer an alternative to traditional, Western concepts of ownership. By committing to epistemological equity, museums can transform their practices to reflect a world that is interconnected, precarious, and hopeful—one that cares for us as long as we care for our planet. In the future, museums can embody redistributive, intimate relationships of care for each other and our environment, the earth, and the universe.



ENDNOTES

1. This was clearly reflected in statements made during student protests held on the museum's lawn at three recent occasions: In May and June 2024 a Gaza solidarity encampment was set up on the lawn specifically naming the museum's colonial history as the reason for its positioning; in the summer of 2020, hundreds of protesters gathered on the lawn as part of the citywide Black Lives Matter marches; and in 2016 the Rhodes Must Fall student movements described the PRM as "one of the most violent spaces in Oxford" and focused several protests on the museum.
2. Lorde, Audre. "Learning from the 60s." Address delivered at Harvard University, 1982. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s>.
3. As Bourgeois put it, fulfilling one's social duty is the acknowledgement of a debt." (Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor, 2024: 19).
4. "This ancient Roman concept of solidarity as obligation-in-common appears again in the legal texts and documents of seventeenth-century France. As defined by the Dictionnaire de L'Académie Française of 1694, the terms "solidaire" and "solidarité" refer to the Roman concept of collective responsibility for debt. [...] for in a debt, obligations are to be interpreted in favour of those who are, bound**). Over the course of the next two centuries, the question of shared debts — and solidarity as a potential solution — became foundational to modern European law, economics, and political theory." (Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor, 2024: 6).

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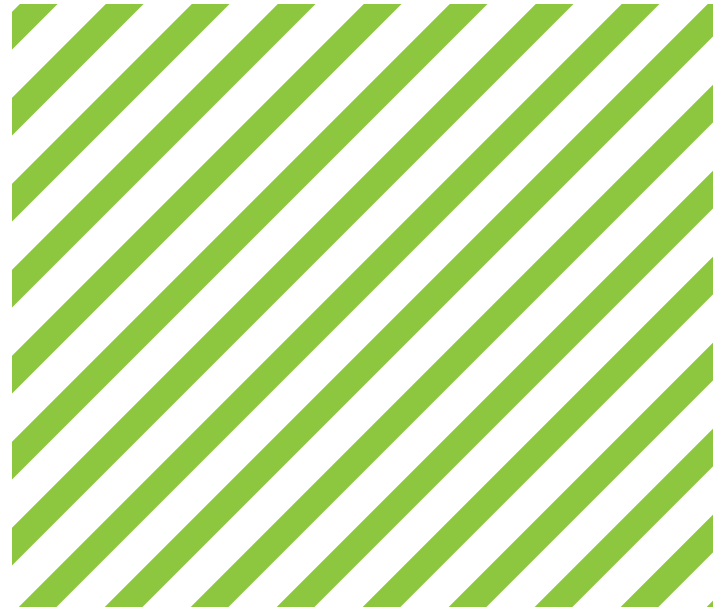
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Professor Laura Van Broekhoven is the Director of the Pitt Rivers Museum and Professor of Museum Studies, Ethics, and Material Culture at the University of Oxford and member of the Dutch Advisory Committee on Repatriation of Colonial Collections that advises the Dutch Ministry of Culture on repatriation. She has played a crucial role in shaping policies on repatriation and promoting inclusion and decoloniality within the academic environment in the UK and across Europe, and has advised on these matters internationally (including for institutions in Australia, the USA, and Mexico). Laura's vision has enabled the PRM to be a cultural leader in realigning museum practice. She is an international authority on museum ethics and the development of new praxis in the field of ethnographic museums, with several pioneering projects and academic articles on this subject to her name. At the 2022 European Museum of the Year Awards, Laura was awarded the Kenneth Hudson Award for Institutional Courage and Professional Integrity by the European Museum Forum alongside Wayne Modest (Dutch National Museum of World Cultures), Nanette Snoep (Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum), and Léontine Meijer-Van Mensch (State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony). The European Museum Forum recognized these four museum directors for their "personal courage and professional integrity in their continuous contributions to developing a new global ethics for museums, addressing the urgent and contentious issues of decolonization, restitution, reparation and repatriation."





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