

Museums and imperialism: who owns culture?

Exhibition of non-Western objects as art in Western museums is problematic, because it objectifies, instrumentalizes and appropriates non-Western objects. Even though exhibition practices have evolved over time, the asymmetry of power between the displayer and the displayed still persists. The set of documents at hand, composed of three articles and two posters, epitomizes how art is political and so are museums. When a work of art is commissioned, it has an agenda. And when it is displayed in a museum, the way it is done epitomizes who gets to write history. By tackling the issue of who owns culture, the dossier delves into the colonial past of museums, colonial appropriation through museum displays and the duty of museums in today's democracies to own up to their political role.

	Museum's colonial past and cultural imperialism	Museum's displays and the politics of cultural appropriation	Museum's political commitment : actions to take a political stand
Document 1		The campaign led by the Guerilla Girls in the 1980s epitomizes the political choices made by museums and their art display > Pointing out the irony of women who are displayed as mostly subjects of works of art but not recognized and displayed as artists	Campaign to point out injustices through works of art that denounce sexual and racial discrimination in the art world
Document 2	“acquisition” covers a lot of realities > largely spoils of war	The politics of presentation in galleries: Neutrality or objectivity do not exist and in every way museum displays, through the labels, the placement, the design of the exhibitions... reflect the choices made the institution. The way museums present the works of art is a political analysis of the world and who gets to write history Ex : art during the abolitionist movement “creating hierarchies of 'civilized' and 'savage'” without owning up to how objects came to be there	Uncomfortable Art Tours > unconventional museum tours that focus on the colonial history of the works of art displayed Campaign “Display it like you stole it” > pushing museums to own up to their colonial past = politics of honesty towards art theft Question of repatriation of stolen artefacts
Document 3	The way art has been acquired through time is a reflection of politics of domination of “conquerors or colonial masters” on “subjugated people” => Most works of art today are stolen property	“Encyclopaedic museums” tend to forget the colonial past of museums and erase the thefts of history Not only does it prevent cultures from having access to their own history (cultural heritage becomes a prisoner of European museums), but it rewrites history by lying about how works of art came to Europe Criticism of the lack of diversity among trustees, which as a consequence on museum's policy	“We cannot right historical wrongs – but we can no longer, without shame, profit from them.” Advocating the return of cultural property as a question of human rights (repatriation) + apologies from politicians which have taken place in the last few years
Document 4	From their foundation, museums have always been political. European museums originated from white wealthy privileged milieus.	The way art is showcased cannot be separated from a certain ideology > Western society (ex: Cabinets of curiosities) Today's museum boards still reflect that white privileged origin and it shows through the choices made. Many people of color still don't feel welcome in museums as the way art is displayed exemplifies and hierarchy between dominating and dominated cultures => objectification of non western art rather than recognition of it as art	Role of activist curators and museum directors in making museums democratic spaces and need for museum boards to be brave and take a stand Ex: closure of the Queens Museum in NYC on Trump's inauguration day = “art strike” to mark the event and protest Museums shouldn't shy away from their political responsibilities. Need for museums not only to acknowledge their political histories but also to adopt stances on contemporary issues.
Document 5			National Civil Rights Museum > poster representing the honorees from the Black American community for the freedom award organized by the museum in 2019