Introduction. Decolonising museology or “re-formulating museology”

Yves Bergeron and Michèle Rivet
Introduction

Decolonising museology or “re-formulating museology”

Yves Bergeron
Holder of the UQAM Research Chair in Museum Governance and Cultural Law

Michèle Rivet
Secretary of the Board of Directors of ICOM Canada and Vice-Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

The Decolonisation of Museology

The 44th ICOFOM symposium, held March 15-18, 2021, was well attended. Although the meeting was planned in virtual mode, we received nearly 1,000 requests for registration to follow the symposium online on the web platform offered by the technology department of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). At the same time, the general public was able to follow the scientific papers live, especially the major keynote speeches that opened each day on the ICOFOM Facebook page. Long after the symposium, this page was widely accessed thus indicating that the impact of the symposium was particularly significant. The members of the scientific committee and the organising committee were pleasantly surprised by the interest the professional museum community and the academic world had in the theme proposed by ICOFOM.
These four days have shown that the question of decolonisation is at the heart of the issues that animate and transform the museum world.

The 3 M’s of museology: “musées, métagisse et mythes d’origine” (in French, or “museums, mixing, and myths of origin” in English).

Let us recall that the call for papers targeted three major themes around decolonisation, i.e., the transformations induced within museums themselves; the delicate question of the mixing of cultures and, more precisely, the place of cultural communities in collections and programming; and finally, the questioning of museum’s myths of origin. If we first consider the proposals selected for this symposium, it is clear that questions related to indigenous issues and, more specifically, to the restitution of collections are among the issues raised by the researchers.

The focus of the 44th symposium: questioning the heritage of European museum culture

Well before structuring the texts selected by the scientific committee, a few observations were quickly made at the end of the symposium. When it came time to take stock, we noted how enthusiastic the museum world was. Indeed, there are many questions and complaints about the role of museums in society. Addressing the theme of colonisation has opened the door to a host of criticisms about their fundamental role in social debates. There are many, sometimes bitter, criticisms of museums, as if they were being blamed for not contributing more to a new social order. Indeed, it is often felt that the challenge of social justice falls more to museums than to governments, whose primary obligation it is. On the other hand, one wonders why museums want to take on this disproportionate responsibility. Clearly, culture is becoming a central issue for society and the museum, as an institution that touches on the arts, sciences, and society, seems to be the privileged stage for debating and promoting living together.

To some extent, we had the feeling that we were reliving or simply witnessing the aftermath of the International Council of Museums meeting in Kyoto, which focused the museum world into two diametrically opposed clans. This polarisation seems, at first sight, to be similar to the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns that spread through the cultural world in Europe in the 17th century. The contestation around the proposed definition of a museum calls into question the museum tradition and in particular those who define themselves as “curators”, in the true sense of the word, i.e., people who are attached to the original mission of European museums centred on material heritage and the validity of learned culture. In a way, it is the heritage of European museum culture that is under attack. In fact, there no longer seems to be a consensus on this common heritage, as mentioned by Krzysztof Pomian in his synthesis on the world history of museums (2020; 2021). Yet, should we
not first of all recognise that without this European contribution to culture we would not be debating the role of the museum today?

In Kyoto, we had the feeling that we were witnessing a kind of trial of classical museology and an indictment of various accusations directed at the large museums that are only just beginning to consider the possibility of returning collections to the communities of origin. It is also important to understand that these criticisms are aimed at the initial cultural and scientific undertakings of museums. If the critical posture is healthy in any discipline, we must acknowledge that the museum world is overflowing with well-being. Beyond the tensions, what does this protest movement reveal? Doesn’t it indicate a desire to question the museum institution? Ultimately, we believe that the museum is not doomed to disappear, as some participants in the Kyoto meeting suggested, but there is no longer any doubt that museums are most certainly on the road to reform, while a conservative faction seems to be moving towards counter-reform. In other words, is this protest movement not a rejection of the museum, as one might think, but rather a desire to re-formulate the museum based on new paradigms of emerging museum culture? Is it not a movement that consists in reappropriating the museum in order to give it a new mission and a new integrity? In other words, there is a form of symbolic reappropriation of the museum institution. This is one of the hypotheses that we propose and which deserves to be explored. The meeting of the International Council of Museums in Prague in 2022 will certainly provide us with answers about the future of the international museum network.

What the texts tell us

This thematic issue brings together the proposals selected by the scientific committee, as well as texts by speakers specially invited for the symposium, including Élisabeth Kaine, Ruth B. Phillips and Bruno Brulon Soares. The corpus of these texts selected by the scientific committee has inspired us in this introduction to group them in three sections. The first section brings together four texts that reflect more specifically on the decolonisation of museology as a discipline under the title Museology in Question. The second section, First Peoples, brings together three texts that address the delicate and sensitive issue of the place of Aboriginal cultures in the North American museum world. The third section, Some Examples from Different Continents, consists of five case studies that demonstrate the international character of the decolonization of museums. Finally, the text by Brulon Soares, which closed the symposium, offers a critical synthesis and avenues of reflection for the ICOFOM scientific community based on five major myths of museology.

1. Museology in question

For this section, four texts address the theme of decolonisation from the perspective of questioning museology as a discipline. François Mairesse identifies the major issues from a historical perspective by proposing a return to the history
of museology. As he clearly shows, the decolonisation of museology is more complex than the decolonial process, which is expressed in particular within the international network of museums through the repatriation of objects. He mentions specifically the violent character of colonisation associated with the colonial empires, mainly European, which more particularly concerns Great Britain and France, but also Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands or Portugal. Thus, he suggests deconstructing the founding myth of the colonial museum, that is, the museum that fundamentally embodies its link to the Enlightenment and its discourse, the power in place, originating from the metropolis. Rather than considering the problem from the point of view of colonisation, he invites us to analyse the propagation of museology, whose ideas spread progressively, during the interwar period, at a time that was still effectively colonial, from the metropolises towards the peripheries. He reminds us that the postcolonial discourse on museology is above all centred on circuits of diffusion. Mairesse gives the example of John Falk who is the most quoted researcher. Clearly, the distribution of publications in English facilitates the dissemination of his thought. He also cites Tereza Scheiner, who questions the hegemony of thought in the production of Anglophone and Francophone discourses to the detriment of other languages. This point of view seemed to be widely shared at the ICOM meeting in Kyoto, where English occupied all the discussions. Furthermore, Mairesse draws our attention to the leadership and influence of certain ideas that are more easily disseminated in certain languages. He highlights the fact that only a small number of researchers aspire to develop exchanges in a more global way. The former, from a research perspective, prospect around the world to discover new ideas in the museum field; the latter seek to make their ideas known to a wider audience (some authors may fall into both categories).

In a way, the leadership of the researchers is decisive, but the dissemination of their vision depends on the place of languages in the propagation of knowledge. In this sense, the recognition of the researchers’ contribution remains relative. Mairesse suggests that the geopolitical approach, which integrates political and military power (hard power), economic power, but also diplomatic and cultural power (soft power), makes it possible to question current power relations in a much more relevant way. This perspective would most certainly allow us to take a fresh look at the colonial relations of museology by focusing on hegemonic issues and strategies.

In the same spirit, Fabien Van Geert explores and nuances the terms postcolonial and decolonial museology. His analysis insists on the need to master and nuance these concepts. He also invites researchers not to oppose these two visions of museology. His interpretation of this movement is relevant, as it is based on his dissertation project (2020), which enabled him to analyse in detail the movement of questioning and transformation in the world of ethnographic museums. The fields he has carefully explored allow him to take an enlightening look at the decolonization movement in Europe, North
Introduction • Decolonising museology or “re-formulating museology”

America, and Latin America. Van Geert agrees with Mairesse’s interpretation when he concludes that it is essential to return to the very essence of these theories in order to understand their application to specific contexts (since all knowledge is necessarily situated). He rightly concludes that if we wish to be able to use terms that are heuristically and universally valid for understanding the world of museums, it is therefore important to reflect on these questions, which go far beyond a mere linguistic exercise. This is undoubtedly one of the first intellectual tasks to be undertaken if the project of museology is truly to decolonise itself. The Dictionnaire de muséologie project developed within ICOFOM is certainly a convincing example that demonstrates the need to clarify concepts that sometimes seem simple, but which are at the same time complex and require nuances depending on cultural aspects.

Marília Xavier Cury proposes a reflection based on metamuseology using the Kaingang collections that were gathered at the beginning of the 20th century in the context of the colonisation of western São Paulo in Brazil. It questions the concepts of “musealia” and “museality” because of the context of the collection of the objects which, as elsewhere in America and on other continents, took place in a violent manner. The study of these objects makes it possible to re-examine the initial process of musealisation as well as the re-reading of these objects by Kaingang groups, which proposes new interpretations. This type of approach, which can be observed elsewhere in the world, shows that museology must integrate anthropological and sociological perspectives so that museum professionals can avoid ethnocentric or sociocentric approaches that consist of favouring the interpretation of a group to which one belongs to the detriment of the communities concerned. Ethnocentrism tends to lead to misinterpretations that may be similar to forms of racism. On the contrary, museology must include in its general training an openness to the other and to difference. In other words, the anthropological approach would make it possible to become aware that one’s own culture cannot be the norm.

In the text from her lecture, Ruth B. Phillips argues that the colonial and decolonial dialectic is too polarising. Instead, she suggests that the museum should adopt a society museum approach, i.e., one that is multidisciplinary and encourages plural interpretations. This change of posture means that museums must break with the Western museological tradition. She argues that museums must revise the value regime that has hitherto governed Western interpretations of culture. In a way, one wonders whether museums should not break with the very idea of interpreting objects and culture. She discusses the problems of “foreignization” and “thick translation”, and recounts examples of translation demonstrating that in some cases it must be recognised that museums are facing cases of untranslatability. Phillips suggests that society museums should, as art museums and especially contemporary art museums do, exhibit objects without mediation on the basis that the work or object speaks for itself and that the museum should not come between the object and the visitor. Here we find the lively debate that ran through the museum and academic world.
when the Quai Branly Museum opened in 2006. Ethnographic objects from the Musée de l’Homme were then under the influence and authority of curators who favoured an aesthetic approach that transformed ethnographic objects into works of art. This problem of translation and interpretation does not seem to be new insofar as each generation periodically revisits the collections and proposes new readings.

2. The First Peoples

François Mairesse shows that it is the current structures of power that must be analysed in order to understand the stakes of the decolonisation of museology. In this sense, it is appropriate to focus on the influence of First Peoples, who have not only been involved in the transformation of museums for several years, but also, more generally, in the decolonisation of museology and, to a certain extent, its indigenisation (Phillips, 2011).

Several papers at the symposium attempted to answer the questions posed in relation to First Peoples. These papers, some of which have been selected for publication, and the discussions to which they gave rise throughout the symposium attest to a growing awareness among museums of the need to engage in a critical dialogue about the interpretation of history, to better realize that indigenous peoples from Asia roamed, occupied, and transformed the North American territory for millennia before the arrival of Europeans. All of these reflections are part of a breakdown of the museum as traditionally conceived and even of New Museology as defined in the 1980s. These reflections also indicate that while such structural changes have sometimes been implemented in museums, some answers are only conceptually formulated and questions are still unanswered. These different papers show us that the inversion of these power relations, as Mairesse rightly notes in the conclusion of his text, cannot be analysed simply by studies, whether they be museological or postcolonial.

Museums’ awareness of the reality of First Peoples is recent, as is the assertion by Aboriginal people to control their history and culture through international instruments. This phenomenon is reflected in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007. Four countries were opposed to it at the time: Canada, which will accede some three years later, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, countries where the importance of First Peoples is significant. This affirmation necessarily implies the establishment of links between, on the one hand, the First Peoples who claim control over their tangible and intangible heritage and who thus recover their soul, their culture, their identity and, on the other hand, the museum that holds these cultural objects.

In Canada, it was following the Cree boycott of the Glenbow Museum’s 1988 exhibition, “The Spirit Sings” (*Le souffle de l’esprit*), that a working group was created, made up of members of the Assembly of First Peoples and the Canadian Museums Association, which submitted a report in 1992: “Turning the
Introduction • Decolonising museology or “re-formulating museology”

Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples” (Tourner la page : forger de nouveaux partenariats entre les musées et les Premières Nations). This report arrived at three main sets of recommendations: increased participation of Aboriginal people in the interpretation of their culture and history by cultural institutions; improved access to museum collections for Aboriginal people; and the repatriation of sacred objects and human remains contained in museum collections, as Maranda and Van Geert discuss in this volume. The 1990s marked a heightened awareness of First Peoples in Canada in their relationship with museums. As Andrea Laforêt, a Canadian ethnologist, notes, cultural objects within Aboriginal societies have a meaning that is part of the life of the society itself. They tell the story, they establish the genealogy of the society and the transmission of authority (2004). The First Peoples have an entirely different conception of cultural objects than that traditionally held by a museum that possesses them, Phillips asserts in her text. These cultural objects often have a sacred character and must be treated as such. Over the years, ethnology museums or ethnology departments of history museums as well as society museums and even fine arts museums have learned to work in collaboration with First Peoples. This collaboration has been and still is, however, fraught with difficulties and is far from being completed.

From the outset, as the symposium’s opening speaker and in her text “Narrative of an Aboriginal incursion into museum territory”, Élizabeth Kaine, Aboriginal curator from the Wendake nation, questions the difficulties encountered by First Peoples in achieving real participation in the development of an exhibition that concerns them. Indeed, for Kaine, the exhibition is one of the most powerful tools of empowerment, a tool of self-construction for peoples in a minority position, victims of colonialism. Thus, Kaine led a very broad consultation with the eleven Aboriginal Nations of Quebec in the development of a synthesis and reference exhibition on the First Peoples of Quebec. What power is granted to the First Peoples, she asks, if it does not concern the content, the aesthetics, the circulation of the visitor through the content, the choice of mediums through which it is expressed, or the choice of objects? For Kaine, the control must be over both the message and its expression. How can we ensure that indigenous visitors to an exhibition about them develop a sense of identity? As Hugues de Varine reminds us, we must stop believing that we can talk about the culture of others from our own perspective.

It is in this sense that Lynn Maranda also asks the question: how can we decolonise the museum, a product of colonisation, without removing all the museum structures and their services from the scene? It is necessary, in a spirit of collaboration, to be able to tell the truths, even the most sensitive or painful ones, to convert sites of oppression into places that matter and to share indigenous knowledge. Like Kaine, Maranda wonders why not achieve a partnership where First Peoples not only have a voice but also control aspects of museum activity in matters that affect them. This is a decolonial approach, as Van Geert calls it, which is a radical desire to deconstruct the Western
approach to museums by giving all their places to practices and ontologies, especially indigenous ones.

Despite the obstacles, certain steps have been taken in this inevitable partnership. In Canada, museums have given First Peoples a voice in various ways: shared responsibility for Aboriginal exhibits, inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, creation of permanent advisory committees or councils, and policies that include at least one Aboriginal representative or decision-maker on the boards of directors. As a symbol, museum institutions in Canada very often include at the beginning of their meetings the recognition of the Aboriginal territory where the meeting is taking place.

But under what conditions can we speak of the decolonisation of museums? Some authors even mention the trap of neo-colonialism. Should we not speak more of a “site of translation”, as Phillips proposes in her text, or recognise museums as “contact zones” as Clifford (2013) has so eloquently developed in his writings?

Museum relationships with First Peoples must be based on respect and reciprocity, Kaine and Phillips assert in their chapters. Decolonization thus re-establishes the traditional worldview, culture, and ways of life of First Peoples; it replaces Western interpretations of history with Indigenous perspectives by dismantling the power structures that have paralyzed and subjugated First Peoples.

In this sense, the recognition of the validity of different worldviews, knowledge and perspectives of First Peoples and the integration of these ways of knowing and doing in museums can be analysed in terms of museology, which is both a theoretical reflection on the museum fact and, as Van Geert states in his text, a field of interdisciplinary research analysing the museum from different scientific approaches, but also as a reflexive approach developed by institutions regarding their role and practices. At the forefront of this reflexive approach, the role and practices of the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum in New Zealand allow us to push the theoretical reflection on the museum fact further. It brings together, in a bicultural and bicephalous structure, the Māori, the First People, and the Pākehā, the descendants of Indo-European immigrants. Mana taonga is an enabling principle that allows Te Papa Museum to recognise the richness of culture, diversity and to design and disseminate models of cooperation, collaboration, and co-creation. Mana taonga is first and foremost an indigenous principle to restore Maori rights to their material culture. As a guiding principle, taonga mana recognises that taonga – which includes objects, stories, and all forms of cultural expression – have ‘mana’, meaning power, authority, and prestige. Thus, respecting and expressing the knowledge, worldviews and learning systems formulated by the Māori are important dimensions of mana taonga. Over the years, the principle of mana taonga has been extended to all museum activities at Te Papa Museum, to facilitate the collaboration of all source communities in the management and use of their cultural heritage, and thus to other non-
Māori collections at Te Papa Museum. This is also a principle extended to other museums around the world (Hakiwai & Schorch, 2014; Hakiwai, et al., 2016). Māori-led changes in governance, management, policy, education and curation have transformed aspects of professional practice and led to interesting museological cross-fertilisations of European and Māori culture. Picking up on Van Geert’s analysis, the principle of *mana taonga* as developed at the Te Papa Museum allows us to reflect on the scope and role of indigenous approaches as a vehicle for museum transformation. For McCarthy (2019), these approaches will potentially provide routes to help decolonise and reshape the foundations of museology on a global scale, transcending so-called ethnological and so-called society museums.

In parallel, museums have also established policies for the return, repatriation of cultural objects, such as the restitution of sacred objects or human remains. In the Americas, these requests from First Peoples are on the agenda. Africa and Oceania are also requesting the return of cultural objects from European countries, returns that are sometimes framed in Europe in legislative texts or following reports, including the one submitted in France by Flewine Saar and Bénédicte Savoy in 2018. Whether in the Americas or in Oceania with the First Peoples, or in Europe notably with African or Middle Eastern societies, this phenomenon is based on the same premises; in so doing, the Americas and Europe are coming together, as Van Geert argues in his text.

For Camille Labadie, at the international level, despite the panoply of instruments devoted to the restitution of illicitly exported goods, few have proved useful in regulating the return of cultural objects to First Peoples. Therefore, many restitutions are nowadays the result of alternative processes, voluntary restitution, mediation or arbitration, which are measured against the relevant moral, ethical or deontological principles in order to arrive at equitable solutions adapted to each situation. Maranda also notes, in the absence of satisfactory legislation, the emergence of a practice of restitution that stems from a moral and ethical feeling and the need to repair injustices. These restitutions apply to cultural property as well as to sacred objects and human remains, such as, for example, the repatriation of *toi moko* (tattooed mummified heads) belonging to French and Quebec museums. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa has been responsible since 2003, on behalf of the New Zealand government, for the repatriation of Māori *kōiwi tangata* (human remains). As Labadie notes in conclusion, when dealing with human remains, sacred objects or objects associated with unique ancestral skills, restitution cannot constitute full redress in the face of dispossession of the very foundations of their culture.

### 3. Some examples from different continents

The papers presented at the symposium and the discussions that followed show the extent to which the decolonisation of museums is a polymorphous notion with variable geometry. Some are based on empirical studies. Asia,
Africa, South America, and Europe are all involved. Different approaches to a complex question: given societal values, how and to what extent do museums give a voice, a right of citizenship to the populations whose cultural objects they hold in trust?

In China, as Lin Li points out, the return of Chinese cultural objects lost between 1840 and 1949 in an illegal or unethical manner is an important issue for the China Foundation for the Development of Social Culture, while the return of cultural objects within China is not. For Lin Li, based on an empirical study, the return of cultural objects is not part of a decolonisation approach. As a useful propaganda tool for the State, Chinese museums are exactly the kind of institution that should be decolonised – she concludes.

Victor Zaiden and Ana Avelar examine how demands for recognition of plural identities and redress of colonial dispossessions are being carried out in Germany and Brazil, two countries with different trajectories and, therefore, two quite dissimilar approaches. While in Germany, demands for the restitution of cultural heritage seem to guide the agenda of historical corrections, in Brazil it is the struggle for the visibility of marginalised groups and the recognition of a failed attempt at cultural homogenisation that is at stake.

This is not far from the conclusion reached by Maria De Simone Ferreira when she examines the role of Brazilian museums in taking into account the reality of the society they serve, analysing how the Archaeological Museum of Itaipu incorporated the claims of fishermen who sought recognition of the importance of their centuries-old traditions. Although the museum may not have considered the fishermen of Itaipu when it was created in 1977, the cultural heritage narratives established by the institution have allowed for a re-characterisation of the historical condition of the indigenous fishermen group, to the extent that today it is the community members themselves who ask to participate in the museum’s activities and even in its management, rather than the other way around.

Christine Bluard, who has studied the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium, notes the importance of the part played by the source communities from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi in the process of transforming the museum and the role of contemporary art and artists. She discusses the appropriation of the collections by the source communities, the value added by the contemporary anchoring in old collections and finally the role of artists and external actors in the transformation of a museum institution. Bluard concludes that the diversity of approaches and views is gradually taking precedence over classification and questions the colonial fact at the origin of this categorisation, a process that is now working towards a redefinition of the museum’s mission.

Simbarashe Shadreck Chitima analyses the decolonisation of museums in Zimbabwe from the perspective of museum education for primary school children. He notes that the colonial discourse continues to permeate museum
activities. For Chitima, the decolonisation of museum education is about providing balanced narratives and offering realistic and relevant content that contemporary societies can find meaningful. The decolonisation education service of museums must include multiple voices representing a wide range of perspectives and bodies of knowledge.

In conclusion

Providing a synthesis at the end of a symposium is always a challenge. Bruno Brulon Soares has succeeded in synthesising the major issues of decolonisation in an original way. The ICOFOM Chair took the gamble of approaching decolonisation by dealing with the theme of myths, which in a way remained on the side-lines during the four days of the symposium. Without going into an exhaustive summary, let us recall here the main lines of his analysis. He distinguishes the decolonisation of the museum from the decolonisation of museology as a discipline which was created, he recalls, as a means of examining the diversity of museums through a single scientific lens. Behind the assumption that museology could be a science – one that was the basis of this international committee (ICOFOM) – there was the idea defended by some of our founding figures that a single branch of knowledge could be used to study the plurality of museums. It shows that there is an initial founding myth at the origin of ICOFOM. There is the common value that museology is a science with the objective of producing a single conceptual basis with defined theoretical centres for the investigation of museums, both in theory and in practice. Brulon Soares postulates that the decolonisation of museums and that of museology depend on a triple and interdependent process that encompasses deconstruction, reconstruction and redistribution. Rather than the mere restitution of heritage, by considering these threefold processes, he believes that it is better to decolonise the mind, that is, to transform the culture of museums in order to denounce the historical violence produced by these institutions.

Brulon Soares identifies five myths. He proposes to start by deconstructing the founding myths in order to bring about a new conception of museology. In his view, the problem is not to have the museum as an object or the man-reality relationship, but to apprehend the museum. The first myth is that of museology as a science, which has been disseminated by researchers such as Peter van Mensch and Zbyněk Stránský, who have tried to define it as an autonomous scientific discipline whose object of knowledge is a specific approach of man to reality. He suggests that we should abandon the myth of a single museology without taking into account differentiated conceptions of the museum and diversified practices. Echoing Villy Toft Jensen, he points out that there is no such thing as a common museology. In other words, museology in its European conception cannot be universal. The third myth he identifies is that of museum theory separated from practice. He demonstrates that there is a higher form of authorised knowledge, in many ways divorced from practice. The International
Council of Museums community wanted to standardise knowledge, leading ICOFOM to develop concepts and a standard basis for theory. This process was set up by separating theory from practice, thus contributing to the creation of a normative museology, validated in particular by European countries. This reasoning leads him to the myth of the object/visitor dichotomy, which brings us back to the founding myth of European museums and more particularly to the cabinets of curiosities associated with colonialism. Museology quickly became rooted in the artificial separation between subjects and objects so that we still find ourselves faced with the old dichotomy of the museum's focus on material objects and its focus on visitors. Finally, the fifth myth is that of decolonisation. In a way, a significant part of the international museum community has started to denounce “post-colonialism” and to claim “decolonization” of museology as if it were an antidote to colonialism in museums, when in fact the decolonial project wants to propose a critical look at colonization and modernity, perceiving them as irreversible phenomena. The president of ICOFOM asks pertinent and unavoidable questions: “Is it possible to reverse slavery in the Americas? Is it possible to reverse genocide in Africa? Or the exploration of limited resources through imperial expansion and plunder?” Are we going to solve the question of colonisation once and for all by inventing the idea of a post-colonial museum and getting rid of the remains of this haunting past? Clearly, it seems that these objectives must be shared by both the museum world and the scientific community. This is a common responsibility, since it requires profound changes in museum culture. Moreover, shouldn’t these changes be adapted to each cultural context and take into account geopolitical factors?

Furthermore, several examples show that First Peoples’ museum approaches are part of museum transformation strategies. Following the example of the mana taonga principle developed at the Te Papa Museum, these approaches are part of itineraries that allow for the decolonisation and remodelling of the very foundations of contemporary museology. Wouldn’t museums, as well as museology, do well to draw inspiration from these approaches to openness?

The dark side of the symposium: reform and counter-reform of the museum world

Although the ICOFOM symposium in 2021 was rich in research avenues, it left two themes in the shade. There was very little mention of cultural mixing and this theme deserves to be revisited. Furthermore, considering that the status of cultural communities in public collections remains a highly topical issue, especially in the perspective of museums rethinking their social role, we believe that it would be appropriate to propose a new ICOFOM scientific meeting on this theme, which deserves to be discussed collectively. The same goes for the question of the founding myths of museology, which were not discussed much in this symposium. Brulon Soares was one of the few to consider decolonisation and foundation myths. As he well demonstrates, decolonisation implies, among other things, a re-examination of the founding myths of European museology.
that have been exported around the world and adapted to new geopolitical contexts.

If the decolonisation of museology consists of breaking with the straitjacket of a borrowed model, it is also a question of adapting the principles of museology to specific cultural contexts. It should be remembered, however, that the process of breaking with the dominant culture is always difficult and takes time. This is what the history of the New Museology movement, which emerged half a century ago, tells us. We can also think of the position of Jacques Hainard of the Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel, who tried to decolonise ethnographic museums by freeing themselves from the objects and questioning the role of curators. Let us mention in passing the collective work *Le musée cannibale* (Gonseth, et al., 2002) which proposes a reflection that is still relevant today on the role of ethnographic museums in the world. Although his vision of museology has inspired a generation of museologists, the museum world has been careful to keep him on the sidelines.

In tackling a subject that has long remained taboo, one has the impression that a movement is taking shape that bears similarities to the Protestant Reformation movement, which in the 16th century proposed a profound transformation of Catholic Christianity. If it was the dogmas of the Church that were questioned then, today it is the fundamental values of museums that were thought to be universal that are being challenged. There no longer seems to be a shared museum culture. By forming a common front at the Kyoto meeting, the countries that have remained faithful to the original values, i.e. collections, research and preservation, are embarking on what could look like a counter-reform of museology. Many national associations cannot conceive of the museum without its primary mission being to preserve the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity. One thing is certain, however: museums are indeed undergoing a transformation. This is why it is necessary to look beyond the debate on decolonisation to the real issues at stake in the value system of museums, for is it not precisely the common culture of museums that is at stake behind the debate on decolonisation?

**References**


