EDITOR'S NOTES

This special issue delves into the complexities of decolonization efforts within museums across Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. These regions, frequently overlooked in global conversations on provenance research and restitution politics, present unique historical and cultural challenges. The focus of this issue is on how museums in these areas engage with their collections – collections shaped by imperialism, internal colonialism, and ideological legacies. Through a series of case studies and theoretical explorations, this issue aims to shed light on how these museums are confronting their pasts and reevaluating their roles in contemporary cultural and political landscapes.

Particularly museum collections in Eastern and Southern Europe have historically been situated on the peripheries of major empires, such as the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires or Tsarist Russia. These regions were part of empires that had no, or relatively little, overseas colonies, although their political and cultural elites were deeply entangled in imperial networks of power, knowledge, and material culture. The countries that emerged from these empires possess collections that reflect both the impact of internal colonialism – whereby certain regions or groups within an empire were subjected to cultural and economic domination and colonial violence – and the broader implications of global colonialism. Some of the collections discussed in this issue emerged during what Dan Hicks calls "World War Zero," the period between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the First World War, in which European empires waged a militarist-corporate-colonial war across the Global South (Hicks 2020). Other museums and collections are discussed in the context of the interwar period and the Second World War, as well as post-WWII in the context of Yugoslavian Non-Alignment. In reading the articles, it is particularly helpful to approach them through newer concepts such as "implicated communities" (Lehrer 2020) or the "duality of decolonization" (Bukowiecki, Wawrzyniak, and Wróblewska 2020), the former of which draws our attention to how different, (often minoritized) actors are implicated in the material culture of museums beyond direct-source communities, and the latter of which draws our attention to how effects of past imperial rule and internal colonization can be addressed without resorting to overly simplistic and nationalistic views of these historical dependencies.

Unlike museums in the UK or France, which have attempted to make strides in decolonizing their collections, museums in Central, Eastern, and

Southern European regions are often viewed through a lens of "colonial innocence," as described by Matthew Rampley (Rampley 2021). This notion suggests that since these countries lacked overseas colonies, museum authorities often argue they were untouched by such colonial legacies. However, these museums house significant collections that are deeply implicated in imperialist, colonial, and nationalist practices. This special issue offers an interesting mix of places and locales analyzed, as well as their collections. While many authors analyze museums in the big metropoles and centres of former empires, such as Berlin or St. Petersburg, they more specifically analyze how specific collections – from India, the Amur region, or the Balkans – have been integrated, narrated, and showcased in these museums. Germany's colonial history was less prominent before debates began over the reconstruction of the Prussian Palace, now home to Berlin's major museums, known as the Humboldt Forum. Similar to some countries in Eastern Europe (Leher and Wawrzyniak 2023), conservatives and right-wing groups in Germany also actively seek to hinder or resist critical examinations of colonial history. This intricate historical context makes studying museums and collections practices in these various locales vitally important.

Organizing Principle of the Special Issue

The contributions in this special issue follow a structured approach, beginning with a broad institutional analysis and progressively zooming in to examine specific collections and individual artworks. This layered organizing principle allows for exploring the complexities involved in debates around decolonizing museums in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. By starting at the institutional level, we investigate how museums have historically functioned as tools for consolidating imperial and national power while simultaneously serving as sites for artistic inspiration and the expression of sentiments of solidarity with the Global South.

From there, we move to the level of specific collections. This shift reveals how material culture within museums has often been shaped by ideological, political, and disciplinary forces, reflecting the power dynamics of the time. These collections are not neutral; rather, they carry the biases and assumptions of the imperial or national projects that shaped their formation. By analyzing collections at this level, we can better understand how they need to be addressed in terms of contemporary decolonization strategies, while also attending to historical dynamics of power and control that underpin them.

Finally, the issue narrows its focus to individual artworks and objects, showcasing how singular pieces continue to engage with present-day cultural and political discourses. This level of analysis allows us to highlight the ongoing significance of artistic interventions in restitution debates, as well as their broader implications for how museums and societies confront the legacies of empire. This tiered approach – moving from institutional analysis, through collections, to individual artworks – provides a multifaceted framework that captures the entangled histories and complex realities of museums in the process of decolonization.

Contributions

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Saint Petersburg and the Temporalization of the Russian Empire – Johanna Hügel

Johanna Hügel's article, "The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Saint Petersburg and the Temporalization of the Russian Empire," explores the pivotal role this museum played in shaping and temporalizing the representation of the Russian Empire. Hügel highlights the museum's significance in constructing an imperial narrative, focusing on two key artists – Vladimir Markov and Varvara Bubna – who both studied under prominent figures, such as Kazimir Malevich. In 1913, Markov and Bubna visited the museum, where they were particularly captivated by the exhibits from the Amur region.

The Amur region, newly integrated into the Russian Empire at the time, held a unique status as a space for the study of "deep time," a concept through which scholars believed they could trace humanity's distant past. The region was frequently referred to as the "El Dorado of Russia" due to its rich cultural and historical significance. Hügel's article investigates how this region was represented by scholars – especially St. Petersburg–based figures like Schrenck and Shternberg – and how these representations materialized in the museum's exhibitions. Through her analysis, Hügel demonstrates the systematic implementation of the deep-time concept in the museum's display of the Amur region, shedding light on how the museum's curation of this area reinforced the temporal and spatial narratives that underpinned the Russian Empire's self-conception.

The Ambivalence of Museum Discourses About the Other During the Non-Aligned Movement in Slovenia – Tina Palaić

In "The Ambivalence of Museum Discourses About the Other During the Non-Aligned Movement in Slovenia," Tina Palaic examines the ethnographic museum in Goričane, Slovenia, during the period of non-alignment. Palaic argues that the museum's discourses during the Non-Aligned Movement were marked by an ambivalence stemming from the interplay of five narratives that both supported and contradicted the political and cultural shifts in Yugoslavia.

The author argues that the non-aligned period is particularly intriguing because it disrupted traditional Western notions of the "Other" through the principles of non-alignment, which emphasized solidarity with countries in the Global South. However, while this solidarity was clearly articulated in Yugoslavian foreign policy, it did not always translate into consistent museum practices. On the one hand, there was a strong emphasis in the museum on support for national liberation struggles and the broader goals of the non-aligned movement. On the other hand, as the author shows, the exhibitions simultaneously created a sense of distance between the museum visitors and the material culture on display. This distancing effect led to an exoticization of the Other, where foreign cultures were portrayed through a developmental lens that emphasized their supposed lack of progress relative to the West. Despite the ideological commitment to solidarity with the Global South, the exhibitions reinforced hierarchical and exoticized representations of these cultures. This complicated the museum's role in both constructing a progressive stance toward its collections and asserting its claim to belong to the "civilized" West.

Caught Between "Mundane West and Medieval Orient": On the Origins and Implications of the Balkan Collection in the Museum Europäischer Kulturen Berlin – Matthias Thaden

Matthias Thaden's article, "Caught Between "Mundane West and Medieval Orient": On the Origins and Implications of the Balkan Collection in the Museum Europäischer Kulturen Berlin," delves into the origins and implications of the Balkan collection housed at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin. Thaden thereby focuses on the collections of Gustav Adolf Küppers, who conducted five collecting expeditions between 1935 and 1939. While Küppers was not officially a member of the NSDAP, the author highlights how Küppers

aligned himself with imperial and National Socialist ideologies, which influenced his collecting approach.

Thaden argues that it is essential to consider the collector's background when assessing the Küppers collection, as his work was framed by a belief in German entitlement over the Balkans. Küppers, along with his network of collaborators, supported National Socialist plans for Southeastern Europe, seeing themselves as the rightful custodians of the region's ancient folk culture. Küppers's collecting efforts were driven by the belief that this folk culture was on the verge of extinction, and it was this sense of urgency that fueled his expeditions.

In a particularly striking quote, Thaden observes that it was "the ominous mixture of classical rescue ideology and Nazi imperialism" (p. 162) that casts the Küppers collection in a distinctly problematic light, positioning it within the broader context of colonial collecting practices. Although Küppers did not acquire the objects through overtly illegal or deceptive means, they were nonetheless collected in service of an imperialist agenda. The author argues that the collection cannot be separated from the motivations behind its acquisition, emphasizing that Küppers ultimately succumbed to a romanticized view of the Balkans – one shaped by the scientific theories of his time and deeply intertwined with ideological ambitions.

Decolonizing Narratives: Rethinking Indian Collections and Ethnographic Museums in Germany – Shraddha Bhatawadekar and Mrinal Pande

The article "Decolonizing Narratives: Rethinking Indian Collections and Ethnographic Museums in Germany" by Shraddha Bhatawadekar and Mrinal Pande examines how the Indian collections at the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin are shaped by 19th-century German Indology. This influence is particularly evident in the stark distinction made in the exhibition between representations of Buddhism and Hinduism. The exhibition draws a clear intellectual and cultural connection between Buddhist ideals and Christian ideals, as well as between Buddhist art traditions and Greco-Roman traditions. This connection reflects a continuation of a 19th-century version of German Indology and resonates with Western interest in Zen meditation since the 1960s, which has linked Buddhism in the West with notions of tranquillity and happiness.

Hinduism, however, does not receive the same favourable treatment in the museum. Descriptions of Hindu deities are marked by adjectives such as "bloodthirsty" or "seductress," (p. 187) and the exhibition seems unable, or perhaps

unwilling, to distance itself from the outdated narratives of 19th-century Indology. As the authors note, Hindu deities were often dismissed because they did not align with Western ideas of order and rationality; gods and goddesses with multiple arms or legs were deemed "irrational."

The authors also highlight the museum's reliance on an outdated division between the Brahmanical-Buddhist and Muhammadan periods – categories developed by European and British colonial archaeologists, which the museum has uncritically adopted. This rigid framework ignores the region's multilayered history. The authors argue that collaboration with source communities and experts could help dismantle these outdated colonial narratives and redefine the exhibition in ways more reflective of current understandings.

The Deadlock of the Decolonization of Museums: When the Colonizer Becomes the Decolonizer – Cihan Küçük

Cihan Küçük's article, "The Deadlock of the Decolonization of Museums: When the Colonizer Becomes the Decolonizer," offers a philosophical and artistic reflection on *Stereo*, a work by the artist Cevdet Erek that engages with the Great Altar of Pergamon. This artwork was first exhibited in Germany in 2019 at the Ruhrtriennale in Bochum. The author, who served as the production manager at Arter Gallery in Istanbul – where he previously oversaw an exhibition of Erek's work – traces the historical and political significance of the Pergamon Altar, which holds a central role in the artwork.

The article critically examines the presence of the Pergamon Altar in contemporary spaces, particularly its connection to the Humboldt Forum, which is now housed in the reconstructed Prussian Palace in Berlin. The author highlights the Forum's complex history, tracing its evolution from its predecessor, the GDR-era structure, to its current incarnation as the Humboldt Forum. According to the author, the Forum represents not merely a reconstruction of the past but also a problematic *reincarnation*, one that seeks to erase other layers of Berlin's history, including its Nazi and communist past.

Additionally, Küçük draws attention to more recent challenges. In 2022, three Cameroonian researchers from a provenance research team were denied visas by German authorities, who questioned their intentions to return to their home country upon completion of the research project. This event illustrates how researchers from indigenous or Global South communities are systematically excluded from fully participating in the decolonization process in Germany.

Conclusion

The case studies featured in this special issue grapple with the legacies of imperialism, internal colonialism, and national identity-building. Some museums, like the Goričane Museum in Slovenia, reflect the tensions between national narratives and international solidarity, while others, such as those in Berlin, grapple with a past that was shaped by colonial revisionism – ironically attempting to alleviate this past by housing museums in a resurrected Prussian castle.

As Amy Lonetree argues in "Decolonizing Museums" (Lonetree 2012, 23), it becomes clear that decolonization is not only about changing how collections are presented within museums themselves. As Lonetree argues, decolonization must involve a shift "from curator-controlled presentations" to a more inclusive and collaborative process, whereby the communities represented (e.g., Indigenous or marginalized communities) are actively involved in shaping exhibition content. In this way, the Indian collections in Berlin could be reframed into more contemporary and diverse exhibitions, previously deemed less problematic collections scrutinized more deeply, and the museum's role in a broader sociopolitical and historical context analyzed more carefully. This perspective reminds us that museums cannot be viewed in isolation; they are embedded in larger sociopolitical environments that shape their narratives, practices, and the challenges they face in addressing colonial legacies. Therefore, the work of decolonization must consider the broader historical and political contexts within which these institutions operate.

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