

## **Museums as the Catalysts for a Democratic Revolution in Cultural Policy**

David Anderson, Aude Campbell Le Guennec, Americo Castilla, Lynn Scarff.

**Number of words: 7917 (incl. references)**

### **Abstract ( Max 150 words)**

As culture exists and evolves predominantly in society, democratic principles may provide a stronger foundation for future cultural development. Through a range of case studies and provocations from Latin America and Europe, this paper delineates the necessary debate on urgent challenges and opportunities for practitioners, researchers and communities in working together with indigenous and marginalised groups to extend democratic cultural practice in the creative and museum sectors. It also considers some of the barriers that may stand in the way of transformation to democratic legitimacy, alongside some recent international collaborations that provide examples of commitment to cultural change. Finally, the paper suggests that the cultural sector should step back from the colonial model of culture and the arts in buildings and collections, which framed the creation of the dominant model of cultural institutions across the world.

### **Biographies**

David Anderson is an Honorary Fellow and Honorary Visiting Professor at the Wales Governance Centre, Cardiff University.

Americo Castilla is Director of Fundación TyPA, a cultural agency based in Buenos Aires (Argentina).

Aude Campbell Le Guennec is Reader in Design Anthropology and Research Lead at The Glasgow School of Art.

Lynn Scarff is Director of the National Museums of Ireland.

### **Keywords (6 words)**

Cultural democracy, coloniality, museums, children, travellers, corruption

## **Introduction**

The Welsh philosopher, essayist, novelist and social theorist, Raymond Williams, wrote in his foundational essay, *'Culture is Ordinary'*, first published in 1958:

“Culture is ordinary, in every society and every mind. So who then believes in democracy? The answer is really quite simple: the millions in England who still haven't got it, where they work and feel. The technical means are difficult enough, but the biggest difficulty is in accepting, deep in our minds, the values on which they depend: that the ordinary people should govern; that culture and education are ordinary; that there are no masses to save, to capture, or to direct, but rather this crowded people in the course of an extraordinarily rapid and confusing expansion of their lives.” (cited by McKenzie, 1989, pp. 3-18)

The implication of William's essay is that society is culture, and culture is society. If this is the case, society and culture should be integrated, so far as possible, not separated, and the purpose of creative practice is not only institutional practice but change in society. Much has changed since this statement was made, but the principles of his analysis remain relevant.

The authors of this article, as museum professionals and academics, have engaged with equalities, equity, inclusion and social justice in cultural policy and practice<sup>1</sup>. As members and observers of seldom heard communities in the Celtic Nations and Latin America, in 2022 they pioneered an original collaboration leading to the organisation of a programme on 'Cultural Rights and Cultural Democracy in Celtic and Minority Nations' held in Caernarfon (North Wales).

For many participants, one of the main outcomes of the conference was a deeper awareness of the impact of the colonial nature of culture and the arts in the Celtic and minority nations, and the persistence and resilience of deep currents of ideological and methodological control, beneath surface appearances of social accountability. In exploring how cultural practitioners should go beyond this model, the authors look outwards for inspiration to other nations and cultures. They also look within, to the diverse contemporary practices of our own societies, as

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors have been involved in the organisation of the “Cultural Rights and cultural Democracy in contested nations”, Conference, Caernarfon, June 2022. This paper refers to the panel discussion presented by the authors “Museums as the catalysts of a cultural revolution”, “cultural rights: a global dialogue”, Santiago de Chile, November 2023 (Museum.Wales, 2022)

well as to surviving traditional and indigenous ways of knowing that respect the connectedness and intelligence of all life forms, beyond the human.

As culture exists and evolves predominantly in society, democratic principles may provide a stronger foundation for future cultural development. Through a range of case studies and provocations from Latin America and Europe, this paper delineates the necessary debate on urgent challenges and opportunities. It also considers some of the barriers that may stand in the way of transformation to democratic legitimacy, alongside some recent international collaborations that provide examples of commitment to cultural change.

## **1. What is a Museum?**

Prior to going deeper into the analysis of the approach to cultural rights in the museum and creative sectors, it is necessary to better define the concept of museum, an organisation born from 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe-centric vision of the world and shaped by the Industrial Revolution. Can museums unite around a common definition of their work? It seems not, if the bitter and still largely unresolved conflict within the International Council of Museums at its Triennial Conferences in 2019 and 2022 over a proposed new definition of museums is any guide.

At the Triennial Meeting of individual members and national committee representatives of ICOM in Kyoto in September 2019, attendees considered for approval a proposed new definition of a museum. With some changes, the most recent made in 2007, the previous definition had stood for more than 50 years. However, on this occasion the proposed new version was not an incremental iteration. It read:

“Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.”

“Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.” (Kendall Adams, 2019)

The proposed new definition immediately faced fierce criticism from some museum professionals. The chair of ICOM France, Juliette Raoul-Duval, denounced it, telling the *Art Newspaper* that it was an “ideological” manifesto (Noce, 2019). At the ICOM Triennial meeting (Kyoto, 09.09.2019), after an intense debate, those ICOM members who attended the meeting voted to postpone a decision on the new definition (The Art Newspaper, 2019).

Following this, the chair of the Committee responsible for developing the definition, Jette Sandahl, and a number of other members of the Committee resigned from their positions. These included George Abungu, former director of the National Museums of Kenya; Margaret Anderson, Director of the History Trust of South Australia; and W. Richard West, citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes in Oklahoma and the former founding director of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Together, these four then issued a detailed public statement summarising their concerns.(COMCOL, 2020)

Three years later, on 24 August 2022 in Prague, an Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM approved a different definition of a museum, one that was significantly closer to that of 2007:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”  
(Seymour, 2022)

This more traditional museum definition was approved by a majority at the ICOM Triennial in 2022. This resolved the public conflicts but not the fundamental tensions over the purpose of museums that have swirled around ICOM over years (Sandhal, 2019). The time may have come to abandon attempts to achieve a consensus on definitions of museums and culture if these stand in the way. The question remains: how could we achieve this in a global museum sector imbued by the colonial culture that shaped the institution?

## **2. The Coloniality of Culture and museums: A Latin American Perspective**

When investigating Culture and Democracy, there are some obvious questions referring to the geopolitics of those two strong words, coined in their origin by a euro-centred pretence of

having universal value, although restricted to the imposition of a colonial pattern of domination and exploitation from the 16th century to the present. Modernity could not exist without coloniality and racism, and modern institutions such as museums, were the tools for the imposition of such patterns.

To speak about the geopolitical aspects and meaning of cultural rights, or democracy, it is necessary to revise the colonial patterns that are still present. This case study proposes to delineate what is a de-colonial perspective as seen from Latin America, and which have been the practical examples of the efforts, not always successful, to critically revert the scenario?

Rita Segato, an Argentine anthropologist who has worked widely in Latin America over themes of coloniality and violence against women, says: "Coloniality not only organises the world economically in a proto-global market, but also organises our subjectivity. Dictating how to think, feel, and be in the world. The coloniality of power, of knowledge, of feeling, is the cognitive empire of euro-centrism, given by the moral superiority of the European, which gives rise to modernity as a claim to universal knowledge." (Segato, 2022, p.23)

Our work as policy makers begins precisely at that point. It requires us to investigate how coloniality has been formed, how it has been constituted, that is, how in those processes of constitution, it has removed alternative knowledge. The modernity machinery, from the 16th century to the present time, was constituted by cornering all existing knowledge, and not only that of the great civilisations, but of all cultural groups that preceded it. And the museum (as also, in many cases, did the church and the university) fulfilled a fundamental task in the founding of that Western civilisation, and the destitution of other civilisations, and of their existing knowledge. Investigating, then, involves uncovering, removing the veil, which is its function in this operation of constitution/removal.

So how do we set free culture from that code? How do we rethink it? According to Walter D. Mignolo, it is necessary to restore a terminology that the colonial code dismissed, given that, in the West, the code "epistemology" dismissed the notion of "gnoseology", and "aesthetics" dismissed "aesthesis". (Mignolo, 2024) A gnoseological reconstruction of epistemology and aesthesis of aesthetics are therefore among our current preoccupations. In other words, rather than trying to decolonise the museum, we should focus on decolonising the idea we have of what the museum institution is, and on how to undertake decolonial tasks that contribute to

restoring knowledge and building future knowledge according to different frames of values based on solidarity, and accepting nature as part of, and not alien to, our own existence.

Is a meteorite a cultural good? According to the Mocovi first nation people of Argentina it certainly is, as the one that, grounded in their territory, is believed by the contemporary descendants to bring harmony to one of the most discriminated communities (Lehmann-Nitsche, 1924-25). A field of meteorites at “Campo del Cielo” (Heavenly Field) in the province of Chaco, Argentina, where one of the biggest meteorites in the world has fallen, is in such way invested with cultural attributes as to have been claimed by Latin American artists to be taken to the 2022 Documenta Biennial at Kassel, Germany, to represent their culture (its monumental weight could have been one of the impediments, not to mention the opposition of local first nations peoples to its removal from a sacred space) (Meteorito El Chaco, 2012).

The unfair market transactions and spoliations of goods, despite their strong spiritual meaning for their owners, have a long history, mainly of artistic, historical, paleontological, and ethnographic or archaeological pieces. As we now see, meteorites may also be added to that list. They all require some type of predominance of power by the acquirer or spoiler, whether economic, political, military, or social. It is at that point that the colonial frame of power persists. Unless in the case of voluntary donation of cultural goods as part of a community’s social phenomena, as studied by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss in 1923, those forced appropriations disregard the powerful social and ceremonial value attached to those pieces and are labelled at fancy museums according to a colonial aesthetic pattern. The cases of the British Museum or Quai Branly in Paris are common examples of such evidence.

To prevent those transactions, some countries of Latin America declare them to be owned by the state, and to require the public registration of those cultural goods possessed by civil citizens, who can only transmit them by inheritance, but not buy, sell, import, or export them. Recently, as a consequence of the extensive looting of fossils destined to be sold in commercial markets such as the annual fossil market in Tucson, Arizona, USA, the Argentine government applied to the Arizona Court of Justice for the restitution of a lift-van full of scientific and cultural evidence illegally smuggled from paleontological sites, mainly of Patagonia, where they are part of its cultural landscape (Fiscales.gob.ar, 2014).

Even if states legislate and campaign on human rights, there is a question remaining. How do the descendants of the first nations communities, or mestizo cultures, react to the persistence of colonial behaviour, and what are their actual and legitimate demands? And furthermore, how do current citizens of all origins who inhabit our countries react to rooted colonial mandates? An interesting case, linked to sacred ceremonial sacrifices done at very high altitudes of the Andes mountains performed by the Incas around the 15th Century, is now subject to contemporary discussions and not only among archaeologists or indigenous groups, but by all those concerned with climate change and social emergencies.

The Inca Trail, which was declared a World Heritage Landscape by UNESCO in 2014, points out specific human actions such as the exceptional burial rituals performed by offering the lives of Inca youngsters of noble lineage in mountain peaks over 5,000 and up to 6,700 metres high, mostly at the south of their large empire -that went from contemporary Ecuador to Argentina - or Tihuantisuyu - probably as a tribute to ensure continued provision of the water required for their sustainability (Schobinger, 1999). Those mummified corpses, originally considered messengers to the superior forces of nature, were found by archaeologists in recent decades, wrapped together with material representations of the Inca Empire - golden lamas, figures of men, Amazonian feather tufts, carved ocean shellfish and illustrated textiles - and were brought down to urban museums or universities for further study and exhibitions. The indigenous inhabitants of the region, who did not consent to the removal of the corpses and associated relics, are now blaming this for the desertification of their land, and are demanding that the human remains and objects be taken back to their sacred sites (Guillermo Martín A. and Barraza y Claudia Iturralde C., sd). There is much still to be learned about those ecosystems and cosmovision in terms of harmony.

The Kallawaya herbal knowledge of Bolivia consists of oral transmission of indigenous medical healing that has cured generations of people. This required safeguarding, following its appropriation by medical laboratories, and was declared as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2003 (Wikipedia, 2024). The materialisation of these legal or safeguarding provisions in Latin America is far from reaching all of the 50 million indigenous peoples of the continent, who are the holders of a knowledge that needs to be reconstituted.

In short, the word restitution involves values of respect to diversity, equity, and justice (all components of the notion of contemporary culture and democracy) that, when violated, may

affect communities within their own national context, who may be victimised by the “collapse of global biodiversity, or the power of an economic system dependent on the fallacy of endless growth, consumption, and debt” (Janes, 2022, p.). Also, colonial mandates may be rooted in such a way within a particular society, conveying racism and injustice many centuries after foreign political domination seems over. Museums may not be totally aware of the fact that they were created as important components of those hegemonic roles, and there is no such thing as a post-colonial period as if it were only a neutral field of study. There is a colonial condition, called coloniality as first described by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, which still today cancels knowledge and promotes racism, and museums have the opportunity and responsibility to promote a unique discussion, helped by their polysemic and, in the best of cases, polyphonic collections (Quijano, 2000).

Universality of laws in relation to culture and democracy are now in crisis, as also is endless global growth. The initiative for restitution is not limited to material goods - and we have given examples of how objects are not “cultural” according to their colonial periodical classification (artistic, historical, or ethnographic), and rather respond to the feelings, use and ascriptions awarded by diverse peoples - but must be accompanied by the most important of restitutions, that of the production of knowledge unfairly cancelled. Legal dispositions may only be legitimate if they respond to a mature discussion and necessary efforts for consent among diverse ways of understanding this extraordinary and unequal planet.

Miranda Fricker (2007) argues that there is a distinctively epistemic kind of injustice, in which someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower. There can be few public places where this operates more powerfully (and, in some cases, more destructively) than in museums, where almost all communication takes the form of a monologue directed by museum staff or artists in the direction of a public that is generally assumed to be without relevant understanding of what is presented, as well as on what is not. In every society, there are groups that face epistemic injustice, as the next study explores through the case of children’s participation and inclusion in the construction of their heritage.

### **3. Museums and inclusion: children, the overlooked Heirs**

In November 2022, the UK Museums Association based their annual conference on the radical actions of museums with regard to diversity and inclusion, leading to debates on making

collections more accessible to diverse sections of the population: ethnic and religious minority groups, persons with disabilities, and LGBT+ people (Museums Association, 2022). In this same conference, where forward thinking reflections on cultural heritage and identity were discussed, the big absence from the discussions was children: more than thirty years after the United Nations demonstrated the importance of including children in our society and invited its members to acknowledge this by endorsing the Convention of the Rights of the Child, children's material culture and cultural participation is overlooked by museums which claim inclusivity. Despite current research in childhood studies emphasising the role of children as citizens (Singly, 2007), when children's education, in the global north, prioritises a child centred approach to learning, their material environment, although central in their life and embedded in the socialisation process, is overlooked. Despite the importance given to their voice in the current debates on societal and environmental challenges (Einarsdottir, 2014), their role in the design of their material culture and making of their heritage seems to be ignored by most of the museums 'sector. This liminal reflection, shared as an introduction to an investigation on children's clothing collections across the English Channel (Le Guennec, Rose, 2024) set the scene of a museums sector, which, beyond the UK, is globally struggling to find ways to interpret and evaluate the contribution of children to society and history.

### **3.1 Dressed for school: rethinking the heritage of education and childhood by re-thinking clothing as an educational and socialising tool in schools**

In this museological context, research such as "S'habiller pour l'école / Dressed for School" co-investigated by the author and disseminated in an exhibition at the French National Museum of Education (Munae, Rouen, June 2023 - March 2024 and online) (Coutant, Le Guennec, 2023; octopus3d.com 2023), explored the role of clothing at school, defined as a regulated environment where children and young people, as learners, reveal their direct interactions with clothing. In this initially modest project, the interdisciplinary steering committee<sup>2</sup>, prioritised an investigation on the way clothing reveals the complex relationships between young people and adults as educators, rulers and makers of children's world. With this in mind, the reflection led initially from research on the dual approach of school uniforms across the globe to the

---

<sup>2</sup> Surface of the exhibition: 300m<sup>2</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2023-31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 15000 visitors (on site), curators: Nicolas Coutant (Musée National de l'Éducation, Munae), Aude Le Guennec (The Glasgow School of Art), steering committee: Julie Delalande (University of Caen, France), Anne Monjaret (CNRS, EHESS), Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien (EHESS), Omar Zanna (University of Le Mans, France), with the contribution of Clare Rose (UK), Virginie Vinel (University of Franche-Comte, France).

complexity of public debates and regulation of secularity in school as a public space. Thanks to this approach, the exhibition became a forum where the history and interpretation of school dress codes were addressed comprehensively in the French context and fed responsible debates. This rigorous and well-informed research, communicated to a wide audience, proved necessary as the exhibition was launched in a particularly heated context: the ban of the Abaya as an expression of Muslim obedience in French schools in June 2023, and the piloting of school uniforms as a political answer to educational authority. The exhibition attracted the attention of the media and policy makers, leading to the contribution of the researchers to the public response on dress codes at school and opening up towards a global field of enquiry (Le Guennec, 2024)<sup>3</sup>.

### **3.2 Conveying children's voice**

However, from the first reflections of the steering committee, it was also crucial to find ways to include young people in the analysis of their dress codes and school clothing environment. Working in collaboration with the International and interdisciplinary network for the research on children and clothing (IN2FROCC) (ACORSO.org, 2018) and under the umbrella of Designing for Children's rights (Designingforchildrensrights.org, 2024), led to the design of collaborative tools to meet this objective.

Therefore, the project included live experiments and surveys conveying children's voices and recording their interpretation of their material culture. It led to the conception of evaluation tools to understand the role of dress codes and clothing in their life, and to support the creation of exhibits able to interpret their thinking process to a museum audience. For example, "Tell me" (d4crscottishchapter.wordpress.com, 2022) focused on clothing as an intercultural medium for children aged 6 to 8 in France, the UK and China. In the context of school-based child-led workshops held in 2023, the children used their dress codes to communicate creatively with each other. This provided a direct insight into their understanding of otherness expressed through the description of their material culture and unfiltered imagination. "Dressed for home-schooling", a survey of French and Scottish young people's favourite dress codes

---

<sup>3</sup> The exhibition "Dressed for School" and related research projects has led to the organisation of the International Symposium "School uniforms, dress codes and public responses: from museums to policy makers", Glasgow School of Art, Munae, Acorso and the University of Aberdeen, to be held at the University of Aberdeen on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

during the COVID19 pandemic (aged 6-12), was also a way to enter their life and thoughts about clothing and led to significant insights into their understanding of dress codes and their projections through other place, times and characters by playing dress up. Furthermore, these projects provided significant insights into the creative and imaginary power of clothes for children: how does clothing foster their imagination, support their understanding of the world, of the society of their peers and the adults? Clothing revealed itself not just as an anecdotal topic, but as a daily feature of children's life and a major aspect of their material culture.

For museums to allow exploration of clothing as a social medium and as educational support, is crucial in the construction of intergenerational and inclusive dialogues. Therefore, the capacity for clothing not only to document, to contextualise, but also to reveal the narrative of societies and individuals, and to contribute to history shouldn't remain accessible only to adult visitors. The emotional bond with heritage and objects via in-depth observation of the materiality of design is accessible to all and serves the purpose of common dialogues (Norman, 2004). In this way, clothing heritage can be considered as the catalyst of children's capacity to embrace a sense of identity, belonging and history, and museums as the forum where this realisation happens. Therefore, to re-define the mission of the museums, the active inclusion of all, amongst whom are children, is necessary. "Dressed for school", thanks to varied and comprehensive perspectives on school clothing, demonstrated the importance not only to rethink the heritage of education and childhood, but also to conceive museums as the cradles for research investigating the material interpretation and social behaviours of all users, whatever their age and position in society, to influence society.

The project conveyed children's voices in order to transform an anecdotal topic into an inquiry, composing with and opposing adults' perceptions of children as a community of becoming adults. This case study demonstrates the processes in place to transform the exhibition into a forum where adults, educators and policy makers gain insight from the children to advance society. It also demonstrates the urgent need for museums to include young people not only in the discovery but more importantly in the making of their heritage through innovative co-designed media.

One of the critical challenges faced by museums is how they should acknowledge the wrongs inflicted on marginalised groups within their own society, who are the holders of significant

indigenous knowledge of huge cultural significance, but who have previously been treated without respect and excluded by the institutions of the state, including museums themselves. The following case study from the Republic of Ireland explores the notion of community engagement and how museums, defined by their location and collections, can address cultural appropriation and inclusion of diverse communities, in ways that respect their distinctive cultural traditions and belief systems.

#### **4. Where is the museum? Engaging and caring for our cultural heritage outside of the museum's walls.**

In the development of its new Strategic Plan, the National Museum of Ireland set out its vision for 2028:

“The National Museum of Ireland will be a place of sanctuary and surprise. Through greater accessibility to our collections, we will strengthen how our audiences can engage with their cultural heritage. We will offer unexpected and diverse public programmes and develop opportunities for increased research and collaboration.”  
(National Museum of Ireland, 2023).

At the core of this strategy is a focus on changing the ways we engage with the cultural heritage of communities that are significantly underrepresented within the national collection. While there are many communities that could be included, for the purpose of this case study the focus is on our work with the Traveller Community in Ireland. Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority in Ireland that have been part of Irish society for centuries. In 2017, as mentioned on the Irish Travellers movement website (ITM, 2019), Travellers were formally recognised as an ethnic group by the Irish Government following decades of prejudice and treatment by the Irish State that sought to eradicate their way of life, culture and identity.

In 2018, the National Museum of Ireland Country Life based in Turlough Park House, Co Mayo opened one of the first dedicated exhibitions in the Museum's history that explored Traveller culture and heritage (National Museum of Ireland, 2024). “A Travellers Journey” was co-curated in partnership with a number of members of the Traveller community and was opened by the President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins in July 2018. The exhibition, while

small in size, went on to have a significant impact. It provided a key pivot point for the next steps of a number of partnerships developed by the lead curator Rosa Meehan. These follow-on initiatives ultimately led the Museum on a journey to develop a new role in the organisation that recognised that not all collections should be in the Museum and that the work of curators is often beyond our buildings and in communities. Work that is about co-curation and shared knowledge.

Prior to the exhibition the Museum's collection of objects from the Traveller Community was small and primarily focused on tin objects and paper flowers or objects that broadly reflected trade or engagement with settled people in Ireland. The collection did not reflect the rich and ever changing cultural heritage of travellers, their history, story, folklore, and spirituality in any way. Following a successful application by the lead curator Rosa Meehan to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth, the National Museum of Ireland hired its first Traveller Community Development Officer for a three year project to begin to scope and explore the possibilities, mechanisms and supports needed to develop a holistic and embedded approach to the engagement of the Museum with Traveller culture and heritage. In March 2021, Oein De Bhairduin was appointed to the role. As a member of the Traveller Community, Oein began a process of wide engagement and exploration of how a National Museum might better represent the cultural heritage of Travellers while recognising that for many the location of their most precious and culturally significant objects in a large State institution was the antithesis to them of demonstrating their value and worth.

There are currently over twenty three different projects in train with a number of Traveller families and communities across Ireland. Some of these projects may ultimately lead to collections in the Museum, or some may not, leading to collections remaining in the communities but with documentation (oral histories, archive materials) entering the Museum. It continues to be a work in progress. However it has fundamentally changed the structure of the Museum in its process. In 2024, the Museum recruited its first Inclusive Histories Curator - Traveller Culture. The Inclusive Histories Curator is a new role in the curatorial divisions of the museum that recognises that not all collections need to be in our buildings and opens up and explores new mechanisms of collecting, new forms of joint acquisition and engagement. These processes are different from the traditional systems and processes of a museum and bring questions of ownership and mobility into focus. While the work is closely aligned with our Learning and Public Programmes teams - it is a curatorial role. This is important in recognising

that this work is the work of curation but in a radically different way. We expect to develop further Inclusive Histories Curator roles in the coming five years, working with communities underrepresented in our collections and developing new models of engagement and co-curation. In doing so we have begun to adapt and change many of the processes and systems within our museums to enable new ways of working from acquisitions and disposal policies to how we collect oral histories - new ways of working and collecting are emerging across the museum divisions. It is the beginning of much needed change with a long way yet to go but, crucially, with the change of structures and systems, there is a culture shift occurring that will embed this work in the fibre of the National Museum of Ireland.

## **5. Culture, Governance and Corruption**

Achievement of changes - such as those described in the case studies in this article - requires the management of multiple internal and external forces that operate in the environment and constantly ebb and flow around cultural organisations. It would be naive to assume that the journey to democratic practice is the norm, or straightforward to achieve. Jon Price has highlighted some of the common ethical challenges faced by arts and cultural organisations, making (for example) a distinction between principled leadership on the one hand, and self-interested protection of the reputation of leaders and the institution on the other. (Price J, 2023)

It would also be optimistic to believe that the minority of crises that get widespread publicity are caused only by unique, local circumstances. Writing in 2019, Anne-Marie Quigg notes of the cultural sector that “It’s not uncommon for destructive behaviours such as bullying and sexual harassment to manifest themselves at times of crisis” and that “an entire sector can become contaminated by abuse”, citing as examples institutions in London such as the BBC and the Tate Gallery). (Quigg, A-M, 2019]

Few museums perceive it to be part of their public responsibility (as ITV did recently dramatising the UK Post Office scandal) to expose injustice by the powerful, or to support the achievement of social justice. (Tipper and Gilman, 2024). There could be reasons for this: first, an intellectually indefensible concept in the museum sector of “neutrality”; second, a possible lack of ethical courage; and, third, cultural institutions may themselves be entangled in networks of mal-governance, and even corruption. Culture has at least two axes - place and value - which may be highly attractive to people who seek opportunities for personal benefit.

One widely used definition of corruption is that developed by the Centre of the Study of Corruption at the University of Sussex in England. It combines both public office and public interest approaches, and suggests that mal-governance and corruption may significantly overlap:

“The abuse of entrusted power for private gain which harms the public interest, typically breaching laws, regulations, and/or integrity standards.” (Barrington, Dávid-Barrett, 1989, pp.88-89)

Over the last few years alone, many national cultural and sports organisations in the UK - including the British Museum, S4C (the Welsh language television channel, funded by the UK Government through BBC Wales), Yorkshire Cricket Club and the Wales Rugby Union (as well as Quigg’s examples of the BBC in London and the Tate) - to list but some - have been hit by a diversity of governance scandals that have been widely publicised (Higgins C. and Batty D., 11.04.2024; Topping A., 11.01.2024; BBC, 27.06.2024; BBC, 27.06.24).

Political interference may take many forms. For example, in 2020, the UK Government’s then culture secretary, Oliver Dowden threatened to cut Government funding to museums and galleries in England that removed statues associated with British colonialism. He also blocked a number of reappointments at English national museums, making clear he wanted to replace them with like-minded allies (The Independent, 2020). These were improper uses of his constitutional powers, but he implemented them nonetheless.

Political abuse of cultural institutions can be a far more deadly business, something that was brilliantly and heart-wrenchingly portrayed by the Russian dissident, Yuri Dombrovsky, in his novel ‘The Keeper of Antiquities’, which was first published in 1964 in the Soviet Union, within the restrictions of state censorship. The book, set in a national museum in Kazakhstan in 1937, is based on his own experience of two decades of exile from Moscow to Kazakhstan and imprisonment in a gulag. The fictional Keeper’s job begins as comedy but darkens as the Stalinist terror reaches Kazakhstan, and the Museum’s Deputy Director is accused of treason. The Keeper is interrogated by a Soviet Deputy Commissar, before then being released:

“Suddenly he [the Deputy Commissioner] laughed. ‘All right, go back and do your job. Only think over what I’ve said. Try and link your antiquities more closely with the

present day, 'he boomed cheerfully. 'There was a poet, you know, called Bezymensky. He put it very well: 'To be equal to the challenge of our great age you must be able to discern the world revolution in everything, no matter how trivial, 'or something like that. Go and find the world revolution in everything you lay your hands on. Every exhibit should point to that and that alone.'" (Dombrovsky, 1968, p. 181)

Museums in the UK are not prevented by such mortal threats from critically evaluating the history of the British Empire and colonialism, but too often they still chose not to do so. The shameful professional behaviour of public bodies in the UK in failing to acknowledge British colonisation of Ireland is, in the words of the Irish President Michael D Higgins, an act of "feigned amnesia." (Higgins, 2021)

After years of silence and evasion by museums, over the last decade some institutions of public memory in the UK (particularly in Wales and Scotland), have taken action. In a recent example from 2022, Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales invited the Sub-Saharan Africa Panel (SSAP), which was formed in 2009 by a number of Africa diaspora groups in Wales, to lead the process of public redisplay of a portrait of the first, and exceptionally brutal, colonial Governor of Trinidad, Lieutenant-General Thomas Picton.

The SSAP, represented by its CEO Fadhili Maghiya, issued a public invitation to artists to submit proposals. There were two winners - one was Gesiye, a tattoo artist from Trinidad and the other was Laku Neg, an artists 'collective of four women, three of whom are of Trinidadian heritage. Their responses, together with the portrait itself, filled three galleries. These exhibitions were seen as a landmark by many of the Museum's visitors, a profoundly moving and deeply humane example of how artists can inspire empathetic engagement through an historical work of art, while achieving an honest and open re-evaluation by the artists of the actions of one of the most vicious colonial administrators, even by the terrible standards of the period (amgueddfa.cymru, 2022; museum.wales, 2022; Anderson, 2021).

The Picton exhibitions demonstrated that museums can be far more effective when they democratise responsibilities by transferring power to a wide range of civic partners, and support rather than direct their work.

## **Conclusions**

Museums, together with many other cultural institutions, face challenges of democratic legitimacy. The emergence and growth of new global protest movements surely now requires practitioners to work together to rethink culture from first principles, through unrestricted public dialogue on our role, and to make fundamental changes.

Institutions in the cultural sector, often highly unrepresentative of their local communities, and internationally fragmented, needs new, grassroots, democratic models of how they can move forward to a more ethical and sustainable future.

In the museum sector, there are some promising developments. One is the *Manifiesto El Museo Reimaginado* developed by participants in the Museums Reimagined conference, organised by the Argentinian cultural agency TyPA in partnership with the Association of American Museums (AAM) , in Buenos Aires in November 2015 [Fig. 1]. Another is the Porto Santo Charter, *Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship*, developed by Culture Action Europe under the leadership of Paulo Pires do Vale and Sara Brighenti of the Portuguese Government during its recent presidency of the Council of Europe (Porto Santo Conference, 2021).

Underpinning these debates are some other fundamental questions. Does every person, including children, have cultural rights - and if so, what are they, and are they universal? How do cultural rights relate to other rights, perceptions of which vary widely from society to society, and from community to community? Is the building of public participation through cultural democracy an achievable - and a universal - entitlement of citizens in every society, to which all cultural organisations should actively contribute? These questions raise challenging reflections on other claims of universality for human life and culture, and for the whole natural world.

Informed by these case studies, the authors of this article propose new strategies that could contribute to the reinvention of that museums and other cultural institutions, based on five key principles listed below. Their achievement requires vigilance against mal-governance, that will otherwise prevent democratic change:

- First, social justice and civic change are the purpose of cultural organisations;

- Second, cultural rights and cultural democracy, based on the rich diversity of civic, indigenous and environmental thought across the rest of the world, are foundational;
- Third, humans and beyond humans are the primary holders of lived and felt experience, and creators of collective knowledge and cultural expertise;
- Fourth, society and place are our primary locations, not the buildings and collections that have been dominant in the colonial era;
- Fifth, the role of specialist practitioners is to serve and enable society, and not to lead.

Change can only happen if practitioners in cultural institutions and researchers, working in society in close collaboration with their communities, become cultural activists, taking direct responsibility for the development of new democratic methodologies that reflect local realities. The primary focus of cultural change and development should be society itself. Therefore, cultural institutions are not an end, but just one of a number of essential means to achieve social justice through cultural participation in society. To be most effective, practitioners, researchers and communities should share their experiences with others worldwide who make a commitment to cultural democracy, through exchange and critical debate, as part of an informal distributed movement that is defined by these shared values.

## **References**

ACORSO.org [internet]. Lille: ACORSO, 2018 [updated 2024] [cited 19 July 2024]. Available from: <https://acorso.org/en/childhood-and-clothing/>

Amgueddfa Cymru: Reframing Picton [Internet]. Cardiff: Amgueddfa Cymru; 22.11.2022 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://amgueddfa.cymru/blog/2458/Reframing-Picton--from-idea-to-exhibition/> ; <https://museum.wales/cardiff/whatson/11568/Reframing-Picton/>; Museums Association (UK). Available from: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2021/05/the-sector-is-no-longer-unified-on-the-subject-of-the-british-empire/#>

Anderson D. The sector is no longer unified on the subject of the British Empire. *Museums Journal* (Internet). 18.05.2021 [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from:

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2021/05/the-sector-is-no-longer-unified-on-the-subject-of-the-british-empire/>

Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK). Place-Based Research Programme Report: Developing a People-Centred, Place-Led Approach: The Value of the Arts and Humanities. London: AHRC; June 2023 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_978141\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_978141_smxx.pdf)

Barker A. Fiddles N. Parker G. Charles Dunstone quit museum post over government 'culture war'. Financial Times [Internet]. 01.05.2021 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/25642d90-d79c-416f-9ebe-30895790bfa9>

Barrington R, Dávid-Barrett E, Dodson Phillips R, et al. Dictionary of Corruption. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing. 2024: 88-89.

Barrington R. On the Vaughan Gething case, which I find entirely unsatisfactory. Twitter; 19.07.2024 [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from: [https://twitter.com/CSC\\_barrington/status/1814427523473678502](https://twitter.com/CSC_barrington/status/1814427523473678502)

COMCOL, The International Committee of ICOM [Internet]. Paris: ICOM; 2020 [cited 20.07.2020]. Available from: <https://comcol.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2020/07/REFLECTIONS-ON-OUR-RESIGNATION-FROM-THE-ICOM-MDPP2.pdf>

Coutant, N., Le Guennec, A.(eds.). S'habiller pour l'école, Poitiers: Reseau Canope, 2023.

D4CRscottishchapter.wordpress.com [internet]. Glasgow: wordpress, 2020 [cited 19 July 2024]. Available from: <https://d4crscottishchapter.wordpress.com/gallery/>

Designingforchildrensrights.org [internet]. Available from: <http://designingforchildrensrights.org/>

Dombrovsky Y. The Keeper of Antiquities. London: Harper Collins [Harvill], 1991. p.181 [Yuri Dombrovsky. *Khranitel' drevnostei*, Noviyi Mir magazine 1968, No 7-8]

Einarsdottir J. Children's perspectives on play. in Brooker, L., Mindy, B. and Edwards, S. The Sage handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood. London: Sage. 2014: 319-330.

Fiscales.gob.ar: La Procelac denunció el contrabando de restos fósiles de un yacimiento de Santa Cruz [internet]. Buenos Aires: Ministerio Público Fiscal; 09.04.2014 [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.fiscales.gob.ar/criminalidad-economica/denuncian-el-contrabando-de-restos-fosiles-de-un-yacimiento-de-santa-cruz/>

Fricker A. Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2007.

Guillermo Martín A. and Barraza y Claudia Iturralde C. Controversia sobre el destino futuro de las momias Incas encontradas en territorio argentina. *Cultura de Montaña*. Sd [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from: <https://revistadigital.culturademontania.org.ar/articulo/646cc8cffc0d3efac6f6e565> [Accessed 29.08.2024]

Higgins C. and Batty D. George Osborne clashes with no 10 over selection of British Museum director. *The Guardian* [Internet]. 11.04.2024 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/apr/11/george-osborne-clashes-with-no-10-over-selection-of-british-museum-director>.

Higgins M. D. Empire shaped Ireland's past. A century after partition, it still shapes our present. *The Guardian* [Internet]. 11.01.2021 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/11/empire-ireland-century-partition-present-britain-history>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/cricket/66032716>

Irish Traveller movement (ITM): What is ITM? [internet]. Dublin: ITM; 2019 [cited 29 Aug 2024]. Available from: <https://itmtrav.ie/what-is-itm/irish-travellers/>

Janes R. The Value of Museums in averting societal collapse. *Curator Magazine*. 2022; 65 (4): 729-745. DOI:1111/cura.12503. Volume 65, Issue 4.

Kendall Adams G. Rift emerges over Icom's museum definition. *Museums Journal* [Internet]. 22 Aug 2019 [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2019/08/22082019-rift-over-icom-definition/#:~:text=National committees ask for vote,in the global museum community.>

Le Guennec A. (2024), "L'habit fait-il le genre de l'écolier ? La question de la mode genrée à l'épreuve de l'institution scolaire dans la France de la deuxième moitié du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours », in Castagnet-Lars, V. (ed.) *Des habits pour étudier: Le vêtement scolaire (XIV<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*. Lille: Septentrion.

Le Guennec A. and Coutant N. (to be published) "L'apport de l'histoire matérielle et de la patrimonialisation à l'analyse des usages scolaires : l'exemple de l'exposition *S'habiller pour l'école* présentée au Musée national de l'Éducation", in F. de la Morena (ed.), *La loi du 15 mars 2004: 20 ans après*, Toulouse.

Le Guennec A. and Rose C. (2024). Children's clothing collections, problems and perspectives: A case study of French and British Museums. *In Situ*; 2024: 52.

Lehmann-Nitsche R. La Astronomía de los Mocoví, *Revista del Museo de La Plata. Mitología sudamericana*. 1924-25; 7 (28): 78.

Mauss M. Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. *Année sociologique*. 1923-1924. in *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 4e ed: 1968.

McKenzie N, *Convictions*. London: MacGibbon & Gee, 1958. in Gable R, Williams R. (ed.). *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. London: Verso, 1989, pp. 3–18

Mellado L., Brulon Soares B. Introduction. 50 years of the Round Table of Santiago de Chile: current key readings. *ICOFOM Study Series*. 2022: 50-1, [Cited 30 Dec. 2022]. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/4090> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.4090>

Meteorito El Chaco [internet]. Buenos Aires: Wordpress; 09.10.2012 [cited 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024]. Available from: <https://meteoritoelchaco.wordpress.com/2012/10/09/la-nacion-oculta-en-el-meteorito/> [Accessed 29.08.2024]

Mignolo W. D. *Aesthesis decolonial*. *Calle 14*. 2010; 4(4): 10-25 [cited 15.07.2024]. DOI: 10.14483/21450706.1224. Available from: <https://revistas.udistrital.edu.co/index.php/c14/article/view/1224>.

Museum.ie [internet]. Dublin: National Museum of Ireland; 2024 [cited 29 Aug 2024]. Available from: <https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Museums/Country-Life/Exhibitions/Previous-Exhibitions/Travellers-Journey>

Museum.ie [internet]. *Increasing Accessibility, Engaging Community 2023 - 2028*. Dublin: National Museum of Ireland; 2023 [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from: [https://www.museum.ie/getmedia/f92a1e93-c275-4f12-9f14-271c0871d1a2/NMI\\_A5\\_Strategic-Plan-2023-2028\\_Digital.pdf](https://www.museum.ie/getmedia/f92a1e93-c275-4f12-9f14-271c0871d1a2/NMI_A5_Strategic-Plan-2023-2028_Digital.pdf)

Museum.Wales [Internet]. *Reframing Picton*. Cardiff: National Museum of Wales; 2022 [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from: <https://museum.wales/cardiff/whatson/11568/Reframing-Picton/>

Museum.Wales [Internet]. *Cultural rights and cultural democracy*. Cardiff: National Museums of Wales; 2022 [cited 29 Aug 2024]. Available from: <https://museum.wales/CRCD2022/>

Museumsassociation.org: *Museums association conference* [internet]. London: Museums Association; [cited 2024 Jul. 14]. Available from: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/conference-2022-content/#>

Noce V. What exactly is a museum? Icom comes to blows over new definition. *The Art Newspaper* [Internet]. 19 Aug. 2019 [cited 29 Aug 2024]. Available from: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/08/19/what-exactly-is-a-museum-icom-comes-to-blows-over-new-definition>.

Norman D. Emotional Design: why we love (or hate) everyday things. New York: Basic Books; 2004.

Octopus3d.com: S'habiller pour l'école [internet]. Rouen: Musée National de l'Éducation – Réseau Canope; 23.06.2023. Available from: <https://my.octopus3d.com/tour/shabiller-pour-lecole>

Porto Santo Conference. Culture Action Europe, Culture and the Promotion of Democracy: Towards a European Cultural Citizenship. Porto Santo: Council of the European Union initiative; 25.04.2021 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://cultureactioneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PortoSantoCharter.pdf>.

Price J. Ethics in Cultural Leadership: Relationships of Value. In Yuha J., Neville V., Marilena V. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Arts and Cultural Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2023. 263–28.

Quigg A-M. When creative becomes coercive: The crisis of bullying in the cultural sector. *Arts Management Quarterly*. April 2019: 131. 49 - 56

Quijano A. Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South*. 2000; 1 (3): 533-580.

Sandhal J. Definitions are dynamic, not static. Museums Association (UK) [Internet] 22.08.2019 [cited 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2019/12/01122019-definitions-are-dynamic-not-static/>

Schobinger J. Los santuarios de altura incaicos y el Aconcagua: aspectos generales e interpretativos. *Journal: Relaciones de la Sociedad Argentina de Antropología*. 1999; p. 24-27. Available from: <https://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/handle/10915/20077>

Segato R. *The Critique of Coloniality*. London: Routledge; 2022. p. 23

Seymour T. What is a museum? Icom finally decides on a new definition. *The Art Newspaper (UK)* [Internet] 24.08.2022 [cited 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/08/24/what-is-a-museum-icom-finally-decides-on-a-new-definition>

Singly (de) F. L'enfant n'est pas qu'un enfant... *Les Grands Dossiers des Sciences Humaines*. 2007; 8 (9).

The Art Newspaper (UK) [Internet] 09.09.2019. Available from: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/09/09/vote-on-icoms-new-museum-definition-postponed>.

The independent [Internet]. Greenwich museum culture war resignation. 2020 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/greenwich-museum-culture-war-resignation-b1840643.htm>

Tipper B. and Gilman L. What can social researchers learn from Mr Bates v The Post Office. Transforming Society [Internet]. Bristol: Bristol University Press; 5 July 2024, [cited 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2024/07/05/what-can-social-researchers-learn-from-mr-bates-vs-the-post-office/>

Topping A. Welsh MPs criticize Lucy Fraser Culture Secretary not meeting s4c bullying scandal. The Guardian [Internet]. 11.01.2024 [cited 15.07.24]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/jan/11/welsh-mps-criticise-lucy-frazer-culture-secretary-not-meeting-s4c-chair-bullying-scandal#:~:text=S4C has been in turmoil,of her right-hand woman>

Transparency International: Corruption Perceptions Index; 2024 [Internet]. London: Transparency International; 2024. [Cited 29.08.2024] Available from: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023>

Welsh Rugby Union 'truly sorry' after damning independent review. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). 27.06.2024 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: [https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/rugby-union/67416181#:~:text=The BBC Wales Investigates programme,wanted to "rape" her.8](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/rugby-union/67416181#:~:text=The BBC Wales Investigates programme,wanted to )

Wikipedia: Kallawayaya [Internet]. Wikipedia; 15.06.2024 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kallawayaya>

Wyn Jones R. After Vaughan Gething's ignominious end, Labour faces the unthinkable: losing the next election in Wales. The Guardian [Internet]. London: 17.07.2024 [cited 15 July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/17/vaughan-getherings-welsh-labour-wales-senedd>

Wyn Jones R. Vaughan Gething's leadership crisis is a disaster – for Wales, for Labour and maybe even for devolution. The Guardian [Internet]. London: 6 June 2024 [cited 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jun/06/vaughan-gethering-labour-wales-devolution>

Wyn Jones R. Vaughan Gething's win in Wales is a cause for celebration - but he still has tough questions to answer. The Guardian [Internet]. London: 18 March 2024 [cited 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/18/vaughan-gethering-win-wales-welsh-labour-leader>

Yorkshire Racism Scandal: ECB recommends £500,000 fine and points deductions. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). 27.06.2024 [cited 15.07.2024]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/cricket/66032716>

## **Figures**

**Fig. 1** TyPA (Argentina) Manifiesto El Museo Reimaginado  
[https://www.typa.org.ar/archivos/descargas/Manifiesto\\_\\_ENG\\_.pdf](https://www.typa.org.ar/archivos/descargas/Manifiesto__ENG_.pdf)