

Session 2 (Part 3)

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Tuesday, Session 2: Repatriation and Decolonisation

Detecting Ethnocentricity In Conservation Practice: Javanese Wayang Kulit Collections In Museum Storage - Eva von Reumont

What is cultural heritage conservation?

In context with this year's IIC Congress location, let's begin this post in May 2020, when New Zealand granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River. Te Urewera park is the ancestral home of the Tuhoe people, and the river became the first natural feature in the country to be recognised as a legal person. If the role of the conservator-restorer is to preserve cultural heritage, how does one meet the demands of a large natural stream of water flowing in a channel to the sea? How does one preserve dance or music? They also fall under the banner of cultural heritage, right?

Lesley Stevenson's discovery of a Van Gogh self-portrait falls within the realm of conservation-restoration. So too does Miromaa's anthropological preservation of Indigenous languages in Australia. Traditional Javanese Wayang Kulit in Indonesia are used in shadow-puppet plays, but also serve as carriers of myth, morality and religious experience, and their physical and theological preservation is undertaken by conservator-restorers like Eva von Reumont.

Eva von Reumont has invested her career towards fully comprehending the enchanting nature and physicality of shadow-puppets. She has written two major publications on Javanese Wayang Kulit, and has worked with the figures both as a conservator and as a curator. On two occasions, she flew from her base in Europe to Central Java to speak with and to learn from original stakeholders. This presentation sought to share some of that research in an opportunity to shed light on that fundamental question: what is cultural heritage conservation?

Storing living heritage

Eva von Reumon first introduced us to shadow-puppets Arjuna and Sengkuni (see below), housed in the Rietberg Museu Zurich. Over a span of 200 years, their characteristics haven't altered all that much: "For the original stakeholders such as puppeteers and knowledgeable audiences, prominent characters such as these are recognised instantly. It is by no means arbitrary how they look." The appearance of these Wayang Kulit figures, their aesthetic details, present an example of the materialised knowledge of human nature and the depth of its significance as Javanese cultural heritage. These puppets are living heritage.



In 2016, Eva von Reumont visited 28 museums across 9 European countries and found a diverse range of storage solutions for their Wayang Kulit shadow-puppets. In her talk she overviewed some of these methods and explored strategies to decolonise them. While previously museums chose vertical positioning, with figures sewn into fabric, nowadays horizontal storage methods—as is done at Übersee-Museum in Germany – are preferred. For better accessibility, museums have even begun mounting figures on trays made of cardboard or plastic.





When presenting these images to a group of archaeology students at the Universitas Gajah Mada in Yogyakarta, the response was tepid. Although the students recognised an invested interest and consideration for shadow-puppets in European collections, it was by no means apparent that these spaces understood Wayang Kulit as living culture: “What our methods reveal is that we regard and treat the figures as ‘objects’, which is an equivalent to dead, inert matter.” I found this especially thought-provoking, as the intangible nature of these objects mean that they cannot be regarded as inanimate—they are intrinsically alive. “They are loved, hated, cherished or belittled, all depending upon the human actions the characters display.” So how can museum storage considerations meet this demand?

The decolonised method of storage and exhibitions

As individuals, these shadow-puppets require better comprehension of their individual traits. Not only should we learn about their original storage method and attempt to reinterpret it, but the puppets (housed in wooden crates containing up to 250 figures) are piled according to their social interconnections, size, posture and personal attributes. With this in mind, Reumont suggested creating individual trays to support their characters, placing them in human-like positions to reflect their agency as individuals, as well as inscribing their names in recognition of their Wayang Kulit iconography.

During the Q&A session, Reumont was asked to elaborate on her debrief with indigenous communities. The audience member who asked this followed their query up with, “How do we know that we’re doing a good job? How do we know we’re landing right?” Eva von Reumont felt that her travels to Java were intrinsic to her evolving practice, as a means to personally experience this culture in the present. I enjoyed ruminating her observation that one needs to consider that “... the audience we’re exhibiting for are contemporaries.” Exhibitions tend to focus on creating an atmosphere that represents things in the past, yet everything related to Javanese Wayang Kulit must relate to our connection to the world in the present. Research is essential, as is funding for projects – without which communication with stakeholders would be limited.

In lieu of Eva von Reumont’s talk, my search for other case studies involving decolonising museums in practice took me to the [Museums Association](#) webpage. Resources for current campaigns, discussion and the reappraisal of our institutions can be found here. It is interesting to note just how far we have come to recognise the trauma and suffering caused by the display, storage and representation of objects in our institutions. I will copy in their mission statement, which I find supports the work that von Reumont’s doing in raising awareness about this issue. “Decolonisation is not simply the relocation of a statue or an object; it is a long-term process that seeks to recognise the integral role of empire in museums – from their creation to the present day. Decolonisation requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work.”

Critical introspection

Back in April, Bill Wei, a senior conservation scientist who works in the Netherlands, posed the following question in his [Socratic Dialogues](#): If there is any object in the world that you would like to preserve for future generations, what would it be and why? No two people had the same answer to that very question. It was a poignant observation, and it struck a chord with me in relation to von Reumont’s talk. I believe that this is because I find the definition of cultural heritage can be considered personal – to individuals, to communities. And if cultural heritage is the essence of humanhood, then conservation-restoration certainly plays an integral role in shaping that legacy.

Session Two, as a whole, taught us that our interpretation of cultural heritage is in constant flux. Both tangible and intangible elements are attributed value across all communities, and these dynamics shift in present time according to changing trends and crises. From climate change to freedom of speech, cultural heritage is an inexhaustible resource for representing identity. The downside is... although this multi-stakeholder network can operate pro-actively in the historic

environment sector, with it comes spill-over effects; both social and economic. It is this fundamental need to maintain cultural property that has led to an increased demand from stakeholders, professionals and practitioners for conservation-restorers.

I'll conclude this blog with a question posed by the session's chair, Kararaina Telra. Nearing the end of the Q&A, Telra took the opportunity to address the point raised by Irit Narkiss about museums not being able to fully decolonise. "With this statement in mind, can we adapt? Or are museums and galleries becoming a thing of the past?" A wonderful debate ensued. As this blog specifically addresses Reumont's talk, we'll focus on her response – but I advise anyone reading this who's interested to watch the recording when it's made available on the IIC Congress website.

Reumont addressed Irit Narkiss' paraphrasing of Deal Sully's work publications around the conservation of a Maori meeting house to the current treatment of the Colston statue and accompanying demonstration placards in Bristol. Irit said, "Sully, [who started using the term: colonising conservation] suggests that conservation, rather than prioritising welfare of objects, prioritises the welfare of the community...After all, the objects in themselves do not have meaning. Meaning is invested by people."

This argument, Reumont states, is still very much used today. But it can be criticised, and many would think it is wrong. "It is a big mistake to think that objects need to be animated in order to have meaning... This is a very wrong perception that comes from the Enlightenment. In a way, objects have meaning for themselves." She said that there exists in our Western culture "a very big cliff" between materials and abstraction. "We don't have a feeling that connects us to materials... [as do many other cultures]." Decolonising museums requires that objects themselves express their own meaning. "We need to accept the oral tradition and heritage as a fact, and not only our analytics. I think in theory we have thought this all out, but really, it's the question: can we feel into this as individuals [from the perspective of a] culture built on the Enlightenment?"

In summary, perhaps we need to broaden our concept of what cultural heritage is before we can decolonise. In order to progress decolonising in institutions, perhaps we need to deconstruct our emotional response and renew it: we need to consider what it means for an object to have agency.



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Image Captions

Figure 1: Two Javanese Wayang Kulit shadow-puppets with Arjuna on the right and Sengkuni on the left.

Figure 2: Image depicting storage option for shadow-puppets in Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.

Figure 3: Image depicting storage option for shadow-puppets in Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany.

Figure 4: virtual Q&A session