

The Whole Picture

The colonial
story of the art
in our museums
& *why we need
to talk about it*

Alice
Procter

C CASSELL

'[Atrocities] prove...that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization, that I wanted to point out.'

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

Introduction

What makes a museum? If you imagine one, in your mind's eye, what does it look like? Who built it, and how? Stone, glass, brick, metal? Steps, columns? And what are you looking at inside? If it's art, how is it arranged? Or is it a museum of things, archaeology or natural history, a science museum, in a converted private home or a purpose-built treasure box? What does the museum feel like? Is it welcoming and warm, or hostile and cold? Are the staff around you educators, or security guards? Do the other people in this space look like you?

Museums are more than just physical places designed to house collections. Their purpose is to shape identity and memory. They do not and cannot represent complete stories, but the distilled narratives they propose often contain the most treasured and the most contested facets of identity, national or otherwise.

A museum is a place we can go to find and tell stories about ourselves and others. It is not the only home for knowledge, but it is one that often holds a national curriculum of identity, preferring the dominant and

mainstream narratives. None of these stories is in the museum by accident. Someone has chosen every object on display, categorized it, and placed it on a plinth or behind glass. Someone wrote the labels. Maybe you were involved in one or more of these processes, maybe you weren't. Perhaps you feel you already spend enough time thinking critically about every other thing in the world, and for you a museum should be a place you can go to just wander around and look at beautiful things. But you still have to remember that, however invisible they may be, there is someone directing you around that space, shaping your interpretation, and choosing what you may look at and how.

I am writing this book because since June 2017, a few times a week, I have taken a group of people around a gallery, on unofficial, unauthorized Uncomfortable Art Tours, and we have discussed the things that live there – how they got there, and how they have been used to tell stories over time. I started my tours from a place of frustration. I had just spent three years on an art history degree that overwhelmingly ignored the colonial and imperial history that created the museums and galleries we were studying, and where the only module that considered the art of the British Empire was optional. I volunteered as a tour guide with school groups and saw the holes in the British history curriculum. Kids would have studied the Tudors and Victorians – eras that bracket Britain's trade in enslaved people – but never touched the time in between, with its intense and violent periods of invasion and war, and the creation and rise of Britain's empire. I was tired of seeing people – overwhelmingly people like me, my privileged White colleagues studying art and working in museums – who had never learned these histories, and could not recognize how they had inherited and unconsciously perpetuated the inequalities created by colonialism. I am hyperaware of my own position as a product of empire: a White person whose family took part in the invasion and colonization of Australia, displacing the Indigenous

nations who were already there. I do not believe guilt is inherited, but responsibility is, and there is nobody alive today whose existence has not been shaped by colonialist, racist forces. That is a legacy we all live with, and we should all deal with the consequences. If you have benefitted, then soaking yourself in remorse and guilt does not help anyone. What you can do, though, is ask constantly how you have felt those benefits. At whose expense were they gained? I grew tired of these histories being treated like something that only happened elsewhere, as if the British Empire and its atrocities had nothing to do with modern-day Britain. British museums are filled with objects from those former colonies, with paintings paid for with that wealth, with representations of imperial power. It is everywhere, when you look for it.

When I started the tours, I knew how hard it was to get privileged people to think about their dark inheritances, even when they were face to face with the legacies of imperial violence. It is hard to hear that the things you have been taught and have taken for granted about your national history are not necessarily true. But I have received a huge response: there is a real, urgent appetite for these stories – and an interest in learning how to deconstruct a museum’s narrative – that I did not expect.

I am not the first person to have the idea of doing alternative history tours, and I did not invent anti-colonial museum interventions; I owe a huge debt to activists and educators who have been leading ‘alternative’ tours for decades, concentrating on histories of race, gender, sexuality, disability, or any of the lives that exist outside of the narrowly defined ‘normal’. But it feels as if we are in a moment, now, that might be a turning point. There is a more public conversation around repatriation and restitution that has been building up for a while, and it seems as if it is part of a bigger, international anxiety around national identity and nationalism. The questions are finally being asked: who has the right to hold objects, and to tell their stories?

I do not have a definitive answer for that, but I am trying to work through the questions. The Uncomfortable Art Tours are about making colonial history visible, showing how museums work now, and demonstrating the ways in which the beliefs of their founders and collectors continue to have a resonance today. These are spaces that are still shaped by the politics and aesthetics of the past, for better or worse. It's not just about the objects or images that have ended up in the museum's collection, but the way they are displayed, too: how curators describe things, how they create narratives by comparing or contrasting pieces. This book is an introduction to being a critical museum visitor: someone who feels confident going into a gallery and seeing behind the curtain to the underlying narrative of the museum.

The way we look at things is never objective: it is shaped by who we are, the experiences we bring with us, the ways we have been taught to see the world. No two people look at art in exactly the same way. This is not to discredit museum workers, or to dismiss their expertise, but it is a reminder that there is more than one kind of expert. A museum worker is qualified by their training, an artist is qualified by their practice, and someone from the same cultural background as the person that created an object has another kind of understanding. Scholarship has value, but it is not the only way to know things.

The idea of a rational, objective way of seeing art is an invention of the 15th century. In 1435, Leon Battista Alberti told a charming story about the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, who created an image of the Florence Baptistry so perfect that it was mistaken for the real thing. Brunelleschi gathered a crowd outside the Baptistry, and presented a bystander with a board to be held in one hand and a mirror in the other. Standing on a precise spot, looking through a small hole in the board towards the mirror that he was holding in front of him a precise distance away, the man was convinced he could see the Baptistry. In fact, he was looking at

INTRODUCTION

a reflection of Brunelleschi's picture of the Baptistry, painted on the board's reverse side. Brunelleschi had 'discovered' how to depict objects and buildings in proportion to each other, so that they appeared to shrink and recede into the distance, just as they do in the real world. This was the invention of fixed-point perspective.

Brunelleschi's revelatory painting no longer exists, so this origin story relies on Alberti's version (never mind that Alberti wasn't there, since he was exiled from Florence at the time). It was a key turning point in European art history: the single moment when vision and knowledge were perfected, made flawless and ordered; the discovery of a system of rules that ushered in the Renaissance and all its glories. Brunelleschi's was a moment of genius that changed the world.

At least, that's how I remember my high-school art teacher describing it. This system of perspective will be familiar to anyone who has ever sat in a school art room dutifully drawing grids. But this way of telling the story misses an important point that is generally accepted in modern art history: there is no one 'better' way of seeing or representing. The compulsion to represent a mathematically 'perfect' world, with 'correct' perspective and proportion, is not always the purpose of making. Brunelleschi's method reflected the very specific goal of creating a visual trick, which worked only if one single person stood at one single point, and looked with one single eye. Anybody can make a picture, and choose to use or not use fixed-point perspective; they can opt instead for any of the technologies of representation used by picture-makers in different times or places: using scale to denote power, flattening landscapes to focus on the foreground, depicting a single object from multiple angles. But representations tend to be culturally specific. For Brunelleschi and his contemporaries, illusions of perspective and depth were a key consideration, just as at other moments representing textures, light or movement became the priority.

Things do not have to be scientifically perfect to communicate. It is possible to recognize a face, or a building, in a few sketched lines. So it is important to understand that the dominance of perspectival study in 15th-century Italy, and the popularity of images with complex backgrounds that showed off the painter's skills, was a stylistic choice rather than some kind of inevitable progression towards a universally brilliant form of art. There is no essential quality of good art, or good making, that transcends cultural borders. We tend to like what we recognize, and what we are taught to like.

So much of the art and art history of the cultural West is tied back to the supposed perfection of the art of the Italian Renaissance. This is the era that is meant to have restored the realism to art, with its concern for perspective, scale and overall vision-imitating accuracy. This is supposed to be the cultural shift that preceded an age of discovery, a golden era of exploration, rising wealth, growing technology. But anyone who calls themselves an explorer is an invader to someone else - someone is always paying for the gilding and relentless progressing. And when a specific cultural moment is given this much prominence, and turned into a cradle of civilization, it is always at the expense of other regions, histories, communities.

This is where museums come in. The 'discovery' of perspective, the dominance of a single fixed point of sight held by an individual, coincided with a greater cultural moment focused on rationalizing and controlling the world. The history of perspective, and the ways people seek to control it, is part of the bigger political shift that celebrated individualism, and an approach to the world that defended its own apparent rational objectivity - this assumption that 'if I can see something, I can understand it, and therefore control it', with the parallel assumption that you can completely know something based only on its outward appearance. It works to compose and constrict the viewer's vision,

imposing rules that only work in extremely specific circumstances. We leave things out, or twist them for the sake of the narrative, for the sake of a 'correct' image. I am not trying to blame the Renaissance for neoliberalism – but I want you to be conscious of the way you have been taught to look at images. Even if you never formally learned visual analysis, it is something you have absorbed from the world at large, through looking at art and film, TV shows, adverts, Instagram, whatever. Your personal taste is valuable, but it is also culturally produced: it will always be informed by the things you see around you, what's familiar, what your peers like. It is affected by histories of art, design, society, and it is sculpted by the institutions – museums – that narrate that history.

Humans are hoarders. We accumulate objects through our lives, and we arrange them around us. Illuminated manuscripts, stamps, tea towels, postcards, 'Old Master' paintings, cool rocks, 14th-century swords, matchboxes. We use our things to interact with the world, and they have meanings beyond their material limits and functions. We project our desires and beliefs onto these pieces, and make them fit or support our views. Humans like order, though one person's order is another person's chaos. Perhaps you display your collections, or maybe you hide them in a cupboard. However they are arranged, two or more objects create a story, shaping a narrative through juxtaposition and comparison. The person doing the arranging is writing a narrative, whether that is happening in a bedroom or a museum. A museum is just that desire backed by power, taken to the extreme of ego – it takes truly unshakeable confidence to believe that your stuff is significant enough to give 'to the nation', and to persuade the powers that be that your offer should be accepted.

Fundamentally, the process of curation is one of organizing what is already there, choosing how to understand and present the assortment

of stuff in a space. Curators may also have responsibilities involving caring for and preserving the collection, but in most museums nowadays that is a role carried out by conservators. (If you meet a curator, ask them about what they do, then wait for them to explain that their job title comes from *curare*, a Latin verb meaning 'to arrange' or 'to care for', and how actually their role is about nurturing or healing collections, not just displaying them – it happens nearly every time.) These are all roles that are increasingly exclusive. While there have been shifts to offer more trainee opportunities, students who want to work in museums, for example, are still expected to show commitment with volunteering, and to be able to undertake absurdly expensive (and usually theoretical rather than practical) postgraduate degrees for entry-level jobs, if they are paid at all. It is still a financially exclusive industry, and senior roles often reflect that, skewing White and privileged.¹

All art is political. Everything in a museum is political, because it is shaped by the politics of the world that made it. If you can't see the views and agendas coming through, that doesn't mean they aren't there: it might just mean that they are close enough to your own for you to take them for granted. Right now, however, it feels as if museums are increasingly at risk of losing their relevance to contemporary society and politics in their pursuit of 'neutrality' (where neutrality really just means the status quo). We are living through times of intense turbulence and transformation, but it is hard to see many museums really reflecting this. Art has always been the tool of the powerful, and also the weapon of the dispossessed: official imagery controls narratives of identity and defines what is 'right', but these representations can be creatively subverted and destroyed. You have to know the rules of the space to sabotage it. If you don't – cuts in funding for arts education, for example, stifle these possibilities – then generations no longer have a place to start from, narratives go unquestioned, and nostalgia triumphs.

This book is divided into four sections, with each section describing a different type of collection or gallery and the objects you might find in it. I have chosen to discuss specific, real pieces to ground some bigger discussions about history and identity; these ways of looking and asking questions, and the ideas and ideologies behind them, can be applied far more broadly. Each object may be unique, but it is of a type, and it has been chosen for its typicality as well as its uniqueness: this is something museums do, too, celebrating objects individually but making clear that they are also valued for what they represent more broadly. My focus is on museums and collections in the cultural West, since museums are European, Enlightenment inventions (more on that later; see page 84), and you will see an overrepresentation of the British Empire and its former colonies, which reflects a personal bias, since these are the histories and collections with which I am most familiar.

An open distinction between 'artist' and 'artisan' will be avoided, since these terms suggest implicit hierarchies and differing levels of brilliance, whereby an artist makes highly valued objects of aesthetic pleasure, but a craftsman makes functional things with a purpose (or, crucially, things that don't look like art to European eyes). We are frequently faced with other forms of distinction, too. Who is the artist that immediately comes to mind if I ask you to name one? Ask yourself: how often do you hear someone described as a 'male artist', or specifically labelled as straight, cisgender, White? And how much more likely are you to hear someone called a queer artist, or a woman artist, or an artist of colour? Linda Nochlin's famous essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' unpicks the way that historically, in the cultural West, access to the classrooms, studios and galleries that allowed an artist to be counted as 'genius' was restricted to a handful of individuals: overwhelmingly White, male and backed by bourgeois families². That essay was written in 1971, and some things have changed, but it's still a

good testament to how difficult it is to summon an entire new canon of artists when everything until that point has been set up to prevent their success. The hoop-jumping required for an artist to be institutionally celebrated so effectively excludes swathes of people that the lack of diversity begins to appear naturally occurring.

As an engaged museum visitor, your task is to remember that a museum is a box of things, put there by a collector or a group of collectors, and presented as complete – so ask yourself, what’s missing? Whose eyes are we viewing the story through? How has this history been massaged and clipped into a narrative? Is it the same old Great White Males, at it again? Don’t fall into the complacency of believing that, if it’s worthy, it is in the museum – and conversely, if it’s not in the museum, it’s irrelevant.

Museums coerce our emotional and intellectual responses to the things they display – that’s not necessarily sinister, but it’s something to be conscious of, as these selective narratives can very easily start to look like definitive histories, or binaries of right and wrong. We learn to follow the logic of the space, move from cabinet to cabinet, believe the labels, behave ourselves, be civil, but not to recognize any ugliness and cruelty in the getting of these collections. We view images with single-point perspective, and we trust them, because we are familiar with the trick they are pulling. We know the conceit, and we choose not to see it. Ultimately, it’s some lines on paper, but we have been taught to recognize them as dimensional, correct and of value. What happens if we learn to view museums in the same way? We can understand them as spaces built with ideologies, and begin to read the text of their inclusion and exclusion. There is always more than one way of looking.