

Decolonizing Museums

Museums have many facets, all of which affect their operation and the reputation of the institution. While the main mission of a museum is to educate the public about a particular history, the information presented must be done so in a respectful manner. Being mindful of any controversy or sensitivity related to museum content is crucial for its professional operation. Depictions of people, places and events or the display of artifacts should be done with the utmost care regarding those being depicted.

Much like historical research, there are guidelines and procedures a museum can follow to decolonize their work as much as possible. Attempting to convey controversial viewpoints or attitudes to the public can be very challenging. This can be exacerbated when a museum is created, funded and operated by individuals with no connection to those being described. Decolonization necessitates outreach by museums and the involvement of those impacted by colonization in the creation of exhibits and presentation of information.¹

Consideration for a museum's content goes beyond the information being explicated and includes the proper care and display of artifacts. Artifacts and items that may of a sacred or sensitive nature require special consideration.² When items such as these are being displayed, decolonization obligates museums to consult the individuals or groups represented in determining the proper exhibit. Consulting these individuals and groups gives influence to those who are being represented and ensures that their input offsets any presuppositions or bias.³

¹ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 21

² Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 37

³ Elisa Schoenberger, "What does it mean to decolonize a museum," MuseumNext, September 18, 2020, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>

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Conveying facts about sensitive or graphic historical events to the general public can be challenging. After all, historians have an obligation to present people, places and events with as much accuracy as possible regardless of how unpleasant they may be. Doing this in a manner that the public can comprehend is a challenging but vital part of decolonization.⁴ Historians and museums must bridge the gap between the comfort level of patrons and the facts elicited from historical evidence.

Because colonizers usually have an advantage in how a story is told, it is important to give voice to those affected by colonization in order to influence the telling of their own story.⁵ Even representations of achievement or success can unintentionally omit important details about hardship or struggles those facing colonization may have endured. Although, portrayals such as these may be positive, they can overlook or omit important details about a group or event and affect the accuracy of the information about them.⁶

Exhibits are a great way for museums to provide visuals for a public that may not be familiar with historical research and can immerse people in an experience to some degree. Again, it is important for museums to find a balance between what the public may be comfortable with and what historical evidence actually suggests. Properly amalgamating information from those affected by colonization and those who are not is necessary for a professional exhibit.⁷

⁴ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 32

⁵ Elisa Schoenberger, "What does it mean to decolonize a museum," MuseumNext, September 18, 2020, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>

⁶ Jennifer O'Neal and Deanna Dartt, "Decolonizing Archives and Museums: What Comes Next," Presentation at the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, & Museums annual meeting. October 10-13, 2017, 15:45, <https://sustainableheritagenetwork.org/digital-heritage/decolonizing-archives-and-museums-what-comes-next>

⁷ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 41

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Museums should be mindful of what people are most qualified for consultation on a particular topic so as to not exclude or overlook potential authorities on a topic. Consideration for opinions and views that may have changed over time is an important aspect of decolonization.⁸ Giving consideration and input to all whom were affected by an event is the only way to establish a comprehensive portrayal of events.

Just as with my previous internship at the Betsy-Tacy Society, I did not encounter anything that seemed clearly biased or one-sided. Like before, I had to remind myself that Maud Hart Lovelace was a woman who lived and wrote books in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a result, I had to be mindful of my position as a man in 2021 working at an institution that is focused on a woman born more than a century ago. With regard to decolonization, I believe the Betsy-Tacy Society is already meeting the criteria for decolonization. As an organization that is followed and administered mostly by women, the Betsy-Tacy Society draws most of its influence from those most like Maud Hart Lovelace.

⁸ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 38-39