

Call For Papers

The British Empire in the Art Gallery: Practices, Discourses, Publics



Workshop Date: 27 September 2024 (NPG)

Submission Deadline: 31 May 2024

The primary aim of this workshop is to facilitate critical engagement with the topic of empire and the art gallery. The subject of British imperialism and cultural institutions is one that has grown in importance and visibility over the last decade, especially in the wake of renewed Black Lives Matter protests, movements like Rhodes Must Fall, and debates around colonial repatriation. Conferences such as ‘Art and the British Empire’ (2001), ‘Artist and Empire: New Dynamics’ (2015) — both Tate Britain — and ‘Art Institutions and Race in the Atlantic World’ at the Courtauld (2019) have done much to highlight the imperial histories of British art galleries and their collections, and important work around research and interpretation is now being undertaken across the UK gallery sector (e.g. The National Gallery’s Legacies of British Slavery project, the Sandbach Research Project at National Museums Liverpool, and the Royal Academy of Art’s Collections Decolonial Research project, as well as its *Entangled Pasts* exhibition).

However, such work is still in its infancy and there has been less pressure placed on art galleries to carry out this work compared to other cultural institutions whose collections bear more obvious, and much publicised, links to imperialism. Take for instance the British Museum which contains a large amount of contested objects and human remains from around the world, and has been a target for numerous repatriation claims. In art galleries, there seems to be a stumbling block between the research being carried out into the cultural legacies of imperialism and how to present this less visible history to visitors. This is not helped by the fact that such work is often siloed and not widely practised across the sector. This workshop will try to bridge the gap by addressing how to publicly communicate imperial legacies within art galleries. It will bring together people working across the sector to exchange ethical practices, and share experiences about both the practicalities of communicating such research, as well as the personal challenges in carrying out this work.

The key questions addressed by this workshop include:

- What can we learn from previous art gallery displays and exhibitions addressing the British Empire and its legacies, particularly the most recent examples?

- How can such projects, and wider research, be reparative?
- How can the provenance of works of art connected to imperial wealth be communicated visually within the gallery?
- What are the crossovers between different British art galleries with legacies of imperialism?
- What are effective and ethical approaches to co-production and public engagement for art gallery displays, exhibitions and research projects addressing cultural legacies of imperialism?

Who is this for?

We are hoping to bring together people engaged in this topic who are working in different fields, with a particular focus on bridging the gaps between museum practice, academic research, and public participation. We welcome proposals from curators, but also want to encourage those working in other roles within art galleries, including but not limited to: learning and engagement, archives, digital, cataloguing, and database management. Although the focus of the workshop is on public art galleries, it is also open to those working in museums, heritage, and other institutions with art collections. In terms of research, we are interested in hearing from art historians, including those focused on histories of collecting, museum studies, and digital humanities, as well as historians and practice-based researchers. This is a growing field and we would like to encourage postgraduate and early career researchers to share their work as well as established academics. The workshop will encourage participants to think about the ways in which people outside of the gallery and academia sectors might participate in this work, particularly in terms of the co-production of and engagement with both exhibition and research. Therefore, while this session is designed for museum workers, researchers and artists, we welcome paper presentations from anyone who has participated in these kinds of projects or is interested in public involvement.

What is the format of the papers?

We welcome proposals for 15-minute paper presentations. We encourage proposals from groups and are also open to creative approaches to the format as long as time limit is respected. If your proposal requires additional equipment (e.g. AV facilities to show a film) then please provide details so we can check what is possible. Selected presentations will be grouped in panels according to themes, and be followed by critical reflection and discussion, with time for breaks between each panel.

Potential themes are outlined below:

- Curatorial approaches to developing art exhibitions and displays addressing slavery and colonialism
- Contemporary art interventions/institutional critique

- Reparative history and thinking beyond object repatriation
- Provenance and object research
- Collectors, donors and artists with legacies of enslavement and colonialism more broadly
- Patterns of cultural accumulation and philanthropy in relation to imperialism
- Institutional histories of art galleries (both in Britain and the former British Empire)
- Art as imperial propaganda
- Exhibition cultures in relation to empire
- Colonial networks mirrored in the art world
- Artistic mediums and/or materials with colonial legacies
- The ethics of co-production and public engagement specific to museum projects addressing colonial histories
- Learning programmes around cultural legacies of imperialism

When and where will this workshop take place?

The workshop will take place at the National Portrait Gallery in London on 27 September 2024, Friday, from 1pm to 7pm. It will end with an optional tour of the galleries.

How to apply and when is the deadline?

Abstracts of no more than 250 words, along with a 100-word biography (for each presenter), should be sent to BEAGworkshop@gmail.com by **11:59 pm GMT on 31 May 2024**. Please let us know if you need a travel bursary, there are limited funds available.

For more information, contact the organisers: Sean Cham (Birkbeck, National Gallery) and Liberty Paterson (Birkbeck, National Portrait Gallery) at BEAGworkshop@gmail.com

This workshop is held in partnership with the Centre for Museum Cultures at Birkbeck and the National Portrait Gallery. It is supported by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Birkbeck.