PITT RIVERS MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
NEWS RELEASE

Pitt Rivers Museum reopening reveals critical changes to displays as part of decolonisation process

Internal Review of Displays and Programming from an Ethical Perspective sees installation of new displays and the removal of human remains, including popular 'shrunken heads'


OXFORD, 14 September 2020 – When Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum reopens its doors to the public on 22 September, visitors will see changes to some of the museum's more contentious displays. These changes are part of a comprehensive programme of work being led by the iconic museum to deeply engage with its colonial legacy, one of the most pioneering approaches in decolonisation at a museum in the UK.

Pitt Rivers is one of the leading and best-known museums of anthropology, ethnography and archaeology in the world and its collection of more than 500,000 items, acquired over more than 130 years, reflects an incredible breadth of culture. Objects range from musical instruments, weapons, masks, textiles, jewellery and tools, and cover all periods of human existence.

However, the history of the Museum and many of its objects is closely tied to British Imperial expansion and the colonial mandate to collect and classify objects from the world over. The processes of colonial collecting were often violent and inequitable towards those peoples being colonised. This difficult history has led the Museum to engage more closely in acknowledging its past practices and the nature of its collecting, display and interpretation and the effects those have today. While such questions are being posed in museums across the sector, the nature of Pitt Rivers' history, collections and displays (its historic labels including racist and derogatory language, commonly used at the time) makes these questions particularly pressing and especially challenging.

How does a large historic museum, with such a legacy of colonialism, begin to address these issues? Pitt Rivers approached this holistically and strategically. Over three years, from 2017-2020, its director, Laura Van Broekhoven, has led a comprehensive and pioneering Internal Review of Displays and Programming from an Ethical Perspective involving both internal staff and external stakeholders, in particular community delegates from different parts of the world but also A-level students and people living in Oxfordshire as refugees or forced migrants.

The review provided a framework for considering these issues and informed a plan for decolonisation, a process described by the Museums Association as "*not simply the relocation of a statue or an object but a long-term process that seeks to recognise the integral role of*

empire in British museums – from their creation to the present day – that requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work." Pitt Rivers Museum has broadened this approach to include work that embraces hope, reconciliation and redress and focuses on co-curatorial approaches to bring new voices into the Museum and ensure public engagement is led by socially engaged work with communities.

The review identified and prioritised displays that required urgent attention because of the derogatory language used in the historic case labels or because they played into stereotypical thinking about cultures across the globe that, as part of the colonial project, were seen as 'primitive' or 'savage'. Some cases were chosen for review as they include looted objects, or featured human remains on display. Others included objects considered sacred or secret by Indigenous Peoples, such as the Shuar tsantsa (shrunken heads).

Laura van Broekhoven, Director of the Pitt Rivers Museum explains, "With the Museum's complicated colonial history, it was important for us to lead this Ethical Review and to ensure we did not shy away from difficult conversations. The implementation of the review is part of the Museum's strategic plan to bring its public facing-spaces more in line with its contemporary ethos of actively working with communities and respecting different ways of being as we become a welcoming space for all. Given the scope of what is required, the implementation of changes will be part of a long-term programme of curatorial work that will engage many stakeholders and stretch out over years, probably decades to come. But given its unique position, gradual change has always been part of curating the Pitt Rivers Museum."

A key outcome of the review was the removal of well-known human remains that have been on long-term display in the Museum. Over the summer, a team at the Museum have been carefully taking 120 Human Remains from open display including the well-known South American tsantas (also known as the 'shrunken heads'), Naga trophy heads and Egyptian mummy of a child. All items have now been moved into storage. The Museum still stewards over 2800 human remains from different parts of the world, and is actively reaching out to descendant communities over the next years to find the most appropriate way to care for these complex items.

Laura Van Broekhoven says: "Our audience research has shown that visitors often saw the Museum's displays of human remains as a testament to other cultures being 'savage', 'primitive' or 'gruesome'. Rather than enabling our visitors to reach a deeper understanding of each other's ways of being, the displays reinforced racist and stereotypical thinking that goes against the Museum's values today. The removal of the human remains also brings us in line with sector guidelines and code of ethics."

For reopening the Museum has installed new interpretation on site offering visitors insight into the way the Museum formed its collections. Displays explain how some of the historic labels have obscured more deeper understanding of other cultures and therefore offer a very limited insight into complex historical processes and can reinforce racism and stereotypes. New labels and corresponding films and podcast offer new readings, bringing to life the displays with more engaging, moving and multi-faceted stories and help visitors engage more deeply with stories through the voices of artists, Indigenous leaders and local stakeholders from Australia, Hong Kong, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Oxford.

Research associate Marenka Thompson-Odlum, who curated several of the new displays says: "A lot of people might think about the removal of certain objects or the idea of restitution as a loss, but what we are trying to show is that we aren't losing anything but creating space for more expansive stories. That is at the heart of decolonisation. We are allowing new avenues of story-telling and ways of being to be highlighted."

Where the human remains were displayed, in a case called 'Treatment of Dead Enemies', visitors will now find a display, curated by Van Broekhoven on the Museum's human remain collections, its work toward restitution of the remains and an explanation of why the objects were taken off display including how they formed part of problematic past academic practices of measuring skulls and bones, and how those are linked to racist ideas about superiority and inferiority.

The Museum is committed to continuing this critical work informed by its review. As part of its stewardship of human remains, it is working with communities on restitution issues – a process that often involves collaborative engagement over a long period and may lead to remains being returned, cared for differently, or redisplayed. It is also engaging in proactive work regarding the composition of its collections, including objects taken through military violence or otherwise under duress. In 2019 the Museum was shortlisted for the Art Fund Museum of the Year, praised for 'its curatorial energy and innovative programming inviting new responses that spark curiosity' and calling its 'bold approach to addressing the contentious histories of its collections sector-leading.'

The Pitt Rivers Museum commitment to this work is supported within Oxford University where the museum sits as a department. The Museum has worked closely with the University on its current Procedures for claims for the Return of Cultural Objects from Oxford University Museums and Libraries, published in July 2020.

Laura Van Broekhoven: "There will be those who will miss being intrigued by the tsantsa, but we also know most of our visitors have several favourite objects. With over 50,000 objects on display, we know our visitors will continue to find things that bring joy, inspire creativity and curiosity as there is no museum better suited to wander and wonder than the Pitt Rivers Museum."

Pitt Rivers Museum is open from 22 September. Entry is free entry but pre-booking is required. For more information visit www.prm.ox.ac.uk

ENDS

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NOTES TO EDITOR

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https://www.dropbox.com/sh/4lx3jgtw2mer727/AABEktFvp-4aWHvQguJwNCCba?dl=0

About the Pitt RIvers Museum
The Pitt Rivers Museum is one of the leading museums of anthropology, ethnography and archaeology in the world. Established in 1884 it now has over 500,000 items in its collections and is in the top 100 most visited museums in the UK, welcoming over 480,000 visitors in 2019. The Museum was shortlisted for the Art Fund Museum of the Year 2019 for its creative programmes of reinvention and reinterpretation, which show a much-loved Victorian space challenging perceptions and demonstrating the vital role museums can play in contemporary society.

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NOTES TO EDITOR: FAQs

About the Shuar Tsanta or 'Shrunken heads'
As part of the removal from display of Human Remains, the tsantsa were taken off display. Made by the Shuar and Achuar people of Ecuador and South America, they are formed from human, sloths or monkey heads. These were much-sought for items to collect, and collectors would pay one gun for one head, leading to a steep increase in violent warfare locally at the height of the 19th and 20th century collecting. They were not 'war trophies' but instead were taken to capture one of the multiple souls of the Shuar and Achuar people and thus seen to provide strength. Some are known to have been made by Shuar, the majority, however, were produced as forgeries, most likely made from bodies taken from morgues.

The Pitt Rivers Museum acquired their collection of tsantas between 1884 and 1936 and, although not part of the original displays, have been on display since the 1940s. However, questions have been raised about their interpretation and the appropriateness of having these human remains on display.

Indigenous peoples have long argued against the public display of their ancestors' remains. Shuar Indigenous leaders**,** Miguel Puwáinchir and Felipe Tsenkush, said: ***"****We don't want to be thought of as dead people to be exhibited in a museum, described in a book, or recorded on film… Our ancestors handed over these sacred objects without fully realizing the implications."*

Since 2017, the Museum is working with the Universidad de San Francisco in Quito (USFQ) to discuss with Shuar delegates how they want to be represented in the Museum and how they advise their cultural heritage is cared for.

Maria Patricia Ordoñez, Curator at Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado and lead researcher of the tsantsa project at the Universidad de San Francisco, in Quito, Ecuador says: "Almost all European and North American ethnographic museum have tsantsa, acquired from 1920 to 1950 when the Ecuadorian law prohibited their manufacturing and commercialization. Of the most relevant collections, aside of the Pitt Rivers, are the tsantsa at the Quai Branly, the Ethnographic museum of Berlin, the Welt Museum in Vienna, the Naprestek museum in Prague, the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in DC, and even far reaching places as the Ethnographic Cabinet in St Petersburg. Nevertheless, the largest collection is in Ecuador, in the Pumapungo museum (National Museum of Ethnography) and private collections such as the Jijon y Caamano Museum".

Why have the Tsantsas and other human remains been removed from display?
As part of its Strategic Plan 2017-2022, the Museum has undertaken an Ethical Review of its display cases, interpretation and programming. This decision forms part of the implementation of the outcomes of this review.

Removing the remains from display brings the Museum's practice in line with UK and international sector guidance and ethical codes.

The displays had been under review since 2007 with new interpretation added. Nonetheless, audience research showed that, although popular with some, visitors mostly understood the Museum's displays of human remains as a testament to other cultures being "savage", "primitive" or "gruesome", revealing that the displays did not align with the Museum's core values of enabling our visitors to reach deeper understanding of humanities' many ways of being, knowing and coping but reiterated racist stereotypes.

Why has the museum undertaken to remove the human remains at this time?

Given that the Museum was closed to visitors, we were able to seize this unique moment to make these changes to the displays.

Will the tsantas ever be displayed again?

The museum takes its responsibilities towards the treatment of human remains and the collection very seriously. Since 2017, the Museum has been working with the Universidad de San Francisco in Quito (USFQ) to discuss with Shuar delegates how they want to be represented in the Museum and how they advise their cultural heritage is cared for.

Will the tsantas be repatriated? Will the museum return them to the Shuar community?

At the moment there has not been a request for the return of the tsantsa. However the Pitt Rivers Museum remains open to any discussions about their repatriation and will continue in conversation with Shuar delegates over the next years.

Will the human remains be repatriated to their countries of origin/indigenous communities?

The museum's collections hold many human remains that originate from different continents: Europe (993), Asia (578), Africa (462), Oceania (513) Americas (270), with a further 78 without recorded provenance. As part of our stewardship of human remains, we are reaching out and working with communities on restitution and/or – where considered appropriate – redisplay of such materials in line with cultural practices and our core values.

Is the museum taking a political stance in removing the human remains?

Collecting human remains was an integral part of disciplinary practices of social evolutionism that ranked some societies as savage and barbarous and others as civilised.

Research on human remains, such as the measuring of skulls and bones, provided a scientific aura to theories that upheld racist and sexist beliefs in the entitlement of white people to objectify black, brown and female bodies for labour, learning, research or entertainment.

Such ideas can still be seen in the racism and practices of exclusion that persist today, since they continue to influence our conceptions of each other.

What is the legislation around human remains in museums?

Recent legislation and professional discussions in the UK have addressed the display and care of human remains in museum collections. Human remains have also been returned to indigenous communities from many British institutions, including the University of Oxford, which has returned Māori and Australian Aboriginal remains from the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

The government's Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (DCMS 2005) recommends that: 'Human remains should be displayed only if the museum believes that is makes a material contribution to a particular interpretation; and that contribution could not be made equally effectively in another way. Displays should always be accompanied by sufficient explanatory material. … As a general principle, human remains should be displayed in such a way as to avoid people coming across them unawares."

What is Pitt Rivers doing around restitution of human remains?

As part of our stewardship of human remains, the Pitt Rivers Museum is working with communities to find ways to heal past wounds. Given the international origins of the collections, this is a long-term process that will involve collaborative engagement over a long period. This process may lead to remains being returned, cared for differently, or redisplayed. In the past, the Museum has returned human remains and associated objects and will continue to work with international partners on this important work.

In May 2017, 10 ancestral remains were returned to Aoa Tearoa. The initial request was made in 2015 but conversations started in 1999. The Maori and Moriori remains, comprised of seven toi moko (ancestral mummified heads) and three kōiwi tangata (parts of a skull), were returned home in 2017.

For the last few years, the Museum has been working with the Australian Government towards the repatriation of 18 human remains and 1 associated item. The return was approved by Oxford University Council on 11 May 2020. There are 114 human remains of which 18 are non-artefactual and which we can be certain came from Australia.

What is the Museum's approach to other objects from indigenous communities?
The Pitt Rivers museum has a long history of positive dialogue and engagement with indigenous communities about the care, display and retention of cultural objects. This work continues daily and, where appropriate, the museum is strengthening engagement with indigenous communities about the repatriation of artefacts. These discussions take time and sensitivity – it is not something which can or ought to be rushed. The museum deeply cares about people and the artefacts they make and use and aims to approach this challenging task with respect and sensitivity. We are keen to enter into dialogue with anyone interested in knowing more about this important work and welcome this engagement. Our website contains information about the work that is ongoing to ensure that the collection remains accessible and relevant. See: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/committed-to-change and https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/collections-online

Can you explain more about the Internal Review of Displays and Programming from an Ethical Perspective and what did the process of the review involve?
The process ran over three years, since 2017, and has included several aspects of the Museum's work. We first led a two-year internal assessment of each display case in the entire Museum to establish ethical/conservation/interpretation issues using guidelines from the Museums Association and DCMS as well as input from Indigenous stakeholders and colleagues. That review indicated the amount of work we needed to do from conservation and technical perspective, and that several cases required curatorial work. It was clear from the review that the introductory case and several specific case displays needed urgent consideration as did, more broadly, the displaying of Human Remains.

Only a part of the human remains the Museum stewards, are on display, the majority (of the over 2800 in total) are in storage. There had, however, never been a more comprehensive audit done. As part of the review, we audited the collections to better understand from which country and continent the originated and have identified better storage facilities for the remains. We have also started a collaborative research project on human remains with Dr Nicholas Marquez-Grant, Senior Lecturer in Forensic Anthropology, Cranfield Forensic Institute, Cranfield University.

Another aspect of the review, was very much focused on identifying issues around labelling and interpretation in the displays from a coloniality perspective. A project, Labelling Matters, was set-up to thoroughly review language use for each case in the Museum. Labelling Matters Research associate Marenka Thompson-Odlum, designed a newly methodology inspired by Anibal Quijano's Colonial Power Matrix model. With this she reviewed the different layers of coloniality that were to be found in the displays. This is a new and innovative approach, that Marenka refined working with different staff and stakeholder community members.

The first phase of the review, focusing on better understanding the scope of the issues, has now been finalised. The Museum is entering a second phase of work that will look to introduce new interpretations and voices, and reimagine what museum labels might look like in the future if we adopt a decolonial approach. Given the time-frame, the way we have introduced the first redisplays, has been as an intervention into the museum that is colourful, and mostly helps

people understand some of the underlying issues but also offers new voices and stories that help better understand what is on display.

Part of the review also led to the removal of 120 of the human remains from display. Input from communities was vital – for instance with regards to the tsantas, the Museum worked with Maria Patricia Ordoñez of the Universidad de San Francisco in Quito to work with contemporary Shuar delegates and set up a project that included their voices.

The review and subsequent focus on human remains and curating of new displays is still ongoing and implementation will continue to take place over the next years to come.

The review has far reaching implications for the Museum and has been the driver for projects: on re-labeling and for new collaborative approaches and changing the way we refer to cultural groups in our collection databases (working with communities across the globe to identify how they would prefer to be named). Amongst many things, it has inspired an ethos of co-curation with community members, and a programme of work that researches the composition of the collections and identifies which collections are contentious and were collected as part of processes of colonial violence.

More information on specific projects and the process can be found on the Museum's website or provided by Laura van Broekhoven, Director of Pitt Rivers Museum.

You state the decision to take these items off display is in line with the values and principles of Pitt Rivers Museum. What are these/your values and principles?
Our aim is to inspire and share knowledge and understanding with global audiences about humanity's many ways of knowing, being, creating and coping in our interconnected worlds by providing a world-leading Museum for the cross-disciplinary study of humanity through material culture.

Guiding Principles

- Being an inclusive, thought-provoking, self-reflexive museum built upon open, engaged relationships with diverse audiences and communities
- Building sustained relationships between people, objects, pasts, presents and futures,
- Respecting cultural diversity and enabling audiences to perceive the displays, collections and their histories from different points of view both philosophically, physically and virtually
- Being part of a process of redress and social healing and the mending of historically difficult relationships through collaboration with stakeholders near and far, including reconnecting objects with originating communities
- Respecting the sensitive nature of the objects we keep and treating them with the greatest of care
- Listening and learning from our stakeholders and audiences
- Inspiring creativity in all its many forms.

Values:

- **Connecting:** we are collaborative, inclusive and welcoming
- **Engaged**: we are receptive, enabling and sensitive
- **Enquiring**: we are open, knowledgeable and challenging.

See: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/files/prmstrategicplan2017-22-foronlineuse-singlepages-ilovepdf-compressedpdf

Were these changes a response to the Black Lives Matters movement?
There were many factors that informed the review and decision to take the tsantas and other human remains off display. The work to decolonise the collections has been underway for some time at the Pitt Rivers and the review began in 2017. The work led by the Museum with

communities is a long-term commitment of the Museum and – in some cases – has been taking place over several decades.

Because of its contentious history, its displays and the collections it stewards, over the past years, the Museum has been a site of protest for *Rhodes Must Fall* and *Black Lives Matter* activism. The Museum understands how it has a responsibility to be held accountable concerning ongoing colonial complicities in its displays and collections and knows it has much work to do still. This is precisely why the Museum feels its work must focus on redress.

At the Pitt Rivers Museum, we condemn racism in the strongest terms; we work towards becoming an anti-racist institution and stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. As a museum, we know it is important not to be silent and to lend whatever support we can, both to our own staff members, and to the broader communities that are impacted by institutionalised, everyday racism and other exclusionary practices. We express our solidarity and our recognition of how museums like ours, and collections like ours, cannot be separated from the ongoing violence and systemic racism happening in Oxford, in the UK, in the US, and elsewhere.

The guiding principles of our Strategic Plan state that we aim to be part of a process of redress, social healing and the mending of historically difficult relationships. We acknowledge that the Pitt Rivers Museum can be an uncomfortable place for people to visit. Addressing colonial, racist and otherwise derogatory language on labels and/or in database description, doing provenance research into the manner in which objects were taken (e.g. by the use of military violence or coercion) and, where requested, taking objects off display or enabling the return of objects to originating communities are all integral to that process.

We aim to be a place of listening to and learning from stakeholders and we want to be an inclusive, reflexive and thought-provoking museum, that enables audiences to perceive displays from different viewpoints. To truly live up to this, we know that we can do more, we can be better and we are committed to do so. We have a responsibility to speak out, and to ask and address uncomfortable questions which we have not asked persistently enough.

The Museum's rootedness in coloniality comes to us in materialized form through its unique Victorian galleries, the often-problematic language of its historic labels, and the very presence of its collections. Collections like the one we steward, were largely gathered during the time of the British Empire. During this period, systems and structures used for the exploitation of resources and people, including enslavement, were set up in institutionalised form in order to accumulate wealth and power for the colonisers. Part of that system of disempowerment of local authority was through the taking of (often sacred) objects. The people who took these objects felt entitled to do so; to appropriate them in order to represent cultural practices, and to speak about and for others from eurocentric perspectives. This process of taking and categorising cultural practice was often highly problematic, as there was no acknowledgement of the views of the originating communities and no reflection on the methods used to dispossess communities of these objects.

A visit to the Museum, therefore, evokes very different emotions and feeling with different people, depending on background and walks of life. For those who have heritage or roots in regions of the world that suffered the violence of Empire, the Pitt Rivers Museum can be a very difficult and hurtful place to be, as it can be for people who have to confront ableist and heter-normative world views on a daily basis. Too often stories have been silenced, perspectives erased. Undoing this coloniality is integral to the work the Museum does today.

In October 2015 the student-led protest movement Rhodes Must Fall tweeted "The Pitt Rivers Museum is one of the most violent spaces in Oxford". As Brian Kwoba explained in The Cherwell newspaper, "it houses thousands of artefacts stolen from colonised peoples throughout the world". We are fully aware and acknowledge that the Museum, while much loved

by many across the globe, should be (and has been) scrutinised, especially by ourselves. Lothar Baumgarten critiqued the Museum for being "the Preserve of Colonialism"; Christian Kravagna has called it "the manifestation of the denial of coevalness"; in 2017 Holly Hemming analysed how the language in our labels is often passive in tone, reductionist and in some cases, apologist and romanticises colonisation by using words that sound innocent and should be recognised as such. In June 2020 author Sunny Singh tweeted how seeing the Pitt Rivers made her think she might be having a 'Killmonger' fantasy and that it makes her skin crawl.

What other work are you doing around decolonisation?

For more information on our work see: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/committed-to-change