

Decolonising the Museum: The Case of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes

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Abstract:

This article investigates the relationship between museums and decolonisation in the under-examined middle years of the twentieth century (c. 1945-1970). Focusing on London's Imperial Institute and its successor, the Commonwealth Institute, it argues that material culture and museums not only reflected wider political change, but exercised agency on processes of decolonisation. Museums helped multiple stakeholders in both metropole and (ex)colony to trial and enact forms of decolonisation, neo-colonialism, independence and anti-colonial resistance and acted as microcosms of wider political encounters: the practices of display and acquisition allowed the subjects of a crumbling empire to retain a sense of control over the process of decolonisation, but importantly they also provided an arena for emerging powers from the former colonies to assert their own agendas and forced staff at such institutions to take this influence seriously. Drawing on extensive archival material representing the perspectives of the Institutes' staff and their contacts in decolonising countries across the Commonwealth, the tensions, collaborations and ambivalence inherent in the relationship between museums and the high politics of decolonisation are explored.

Key Words: museums, agency, decolonisation, Imperial Institute, Commonwealth Institute.

European institutions displaying the material cultures of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas have long been associated with the formation of empires. The collection, the international exhibition and the museum have each been firmly situated as 'committed participants' in colonial histories (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 4); their complex links with imperial agendas in the period before 1945 have been made clear. Equally, the display of material from once-colonised communities in museums after 1970 has also been closely analysed. However, one key piece of this historical narrative, and its important lessons for the development of a post-colonial museum practice today, has received scant attention to date. Relations between exhibition spaces and the politics of decolonisation in the middle years of the twentieth century are not yet fully conceptualised. In fact, in general surveys of museums displaying world cultures, the period between 1945 and 1970 is generally marked by extreme inertia: according to current scholarship, as empire crumbled, there was simply a 'decline in the significance and interest in ethnographical collections' (Shelton 2006: 71). Despite an acknowledgement of the professionalisation of museum practice during this period, and an understanding of the slow move away from evolutionary paradigms to aesthetic and functionalist frameworks of display, the frantic political shifts which dominated the world map in the 1950s and 1960s are rarely seen to have affected museum practice.

However, as Christina Kreps and Robert Aldrich have begun to make clear for institutions in the Netherlands and France respectively, museums were significantly more active than this picture concedes. Kreps (2011: 73) reveals that the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam was a 'mirror' of wider changes in Dutch society between 1950 and 1970, as colonial pasts were confronted and relationships with formerly colonised peoples reframed; Aldrich

(2004: 16-19) argues that the stasis described by others was actually indicative of a highly active process of denial, retreat and forgetting.¹ Indeed, while a lack of funding disabled many grand plans for renovation and redevelopment in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and museums lagged behind the intellectual developments which dominated university anthropology, this article seeks to make clear that cultural institutions displaying and collecting non-Western material culture were more dynamic and directly engaged with colonial histories and the politics of decolonisation than many have acknowledged.

Many institutions across the UK would make fascinating case studies with which to reframe the interactions between museums and decolonisation in the middle years of the twentieth century. However, in an attempt to outline a theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between exhibition spaces, material culture and the politics of decolonisation, this article will focus on a particularly potent institution embroiled in the political and cultural reframing of the post-war period: London's Imperial Institute (1887-1958) and its successor, the Commonwealth Institute, established in 1958 and opened in 1962.²

The Imperial Institute was created to showcase, through its research programme, architecture, and permanent exhibitions, the economic and industrial wealth of the British Empire (Crinson 1999; Crinson 2003: 101-08; Bremner 2003). Supported by the profits of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, the Institute provided scientific analysis of raw materials extracted from Britain's colonies, technical and commercial information to government and industry across the Empire and a broader educational function through its public exhibition galleries. By the 1950s, as former colonies in Asia, Africa and the Middle East began to achieve independence, the Institute's mission required a rethink: a new 'Commonwealth Institute', with a new name and a new site was envisioned as a cultural epicentre of the Commonwealth of Nations. Mark Crinson, in his seminal article, 'Imperial Story-lands: Architecture and Display at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes', has explored the changing nature of the buildings, spatial syntax and exhibitions in both spaces (see also Crinson 2003: 100-123). In addition to providing a useful summary of the organisation's changing identity during this period, Crinson (1999: 101, 111-113) makes the important point that both institutions responded to the political shifts of decolonisation in the middle years of the twentieth century, acting in parallel to the changes, doubts and contradictions of the crumbling empire.

However, it is arguably the case that organisations like the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes did more than 'manifest' the broader political processes taking place around them. Taking into account the final displays and buildings, but also moving 'behind the scenes' to consider the perceptions of and interactions between Institute staff, British politicians, foreign embassy officials and ex-colonial governments, an even richer picture begins to emerge. Developing the work of Kreps, Aldrich and Crinson, this article argues that museums and other exhibition spaces not only responded to or 'mirrored' the politics of decolonisation across the middle years of the twentieth century, but were active agents in this process.³ As we shall see, in the case of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes, a range of stakeholders in both metropole and (ex)colony saw strategies of display and acquisition as a way to affect, mediate and come to terms with wider political change.

This article will explore three ways in which the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes acted as pivotal hubs for processes of decolonisation. First, as others have suggested, even once the Imperial Institute had been abandoned, much about the Commonwealth Institute retained an imperial feel and placed emphasis on a British-led 'ordered and unthreatening vision of the Commonwealth' (Craggs 2011: 256; Crinson 1999: 119-21). As we will see, this vision provided an important tool with which British staff, politicians and others could manage the complexities of imperial history and decolonisation, and maintain some semblance of control in an uncertain time. But while this much-emphasised critique of the Commonwealth Institute is an important part of its history, and an important aspect of its role within decolonisation, this was not the Institute's only function or role. A close examination of the Institute's archives reveals evidence of genuine collaboration and steps towards a decolonised museum practice; the funding structures and governance of the Institute as well as its remit of depicting political change through display practices, meant that its staff was encouraged to share curatorial power and thus embrace a more progressive vision of the world where Britain was no longer in control. Finally, it is also the case that such institutions were key sites for a variety of international actors

beyond the metropole in the middle years of the twentieth century. Governments and businesses from many decolonising and newly independent nations also saw a great deal of potential in the Institute as an ideological tool that could benefit their political and cultural agendas. Following a brief outline of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes and their socio-political context, each of these three functions will be examined in turn. This will offer some insight into the cultural processes of decolonisation at large, exposing the interactive relationship between exhibition spaces, museums and politics.

The unusual status of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes as 'museums' should, at this stage, be acknowledged (Crinson 1999: 100). The Institute was unique in the UK in that it aimed to 'present, in visual terms, not only the history and geography but also the contemporary economic, cultural and constitutional development' of the countries concerned (Commonwealth Institute 1966: 33). Although described later as resembling a 'contemporary museum' (Porter 2007: 437), neither the Imperial nor the Commonwealth Institute was a museum in the conventional sense. The fostering of industrial development and trade was a focus in many of the displays, as well as an aim of those involved. However, as Crinson (1999: 101) has observed, the exhibitionary role of the Institutes 'formed their clearest public expression', and despite suggestions and claims to the contrary, staff cared for, continued to collect, and displayed historic ethnographic material from around the world. Indeed, in their famed use of the diorama mode of display, and even in their focus on the 'modernisation' of the countries they purported to represent, the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes actually echoed certain developments that were taking place at more traditional museums elsewhere, such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. (Wintle 2013).

Global shifts and the emergence of the Commonwealth Institute

The decolonisation of the British Empire has long been recognised as an extended, convoluted process of political, economic and ideological reframing rather than a single teleological trajectory of constitutional reform (Faulkner and Ramamurthy 2006: 1). The celebration of Indian independence from British rule on 15 August, 1947 may have marked a key point in the formal unravelling of the British Empire in South Asia, but the pre-independence, anti-colonial activities of Indian revolutionaries and politicians, as well as the integration of Indian personnel into 'British' political, economic and cultural structures before 1947, hint at the complexity of British power in India (and, indeed, other colonies) long before formal independence. On the other hand, the revival of colonial aims that abounded in British political and economic spheres in the 1950s, even after Indian independence, is well known (e.g. Lynn 2006); despite the startling collapse of formal European sovereignty across the African continent in the decade after 1956, continued economic, political and cultural interactions between former imperial powers, newly independent nations and the superpowers have led to accusations of neo-colonial frameworks continuing to this day, throughout Africa and beyond (e.g. Louis and Robinson 1994).

In the UK, an ambivalence and anxiety about the 'end of empire' emerged, with individuals, political parties, and institutions taking complex and varied stances towards political change (Ward 2001: 11). The Commonwealth itself also underwent complex revisions across this period: after World War II this 'comfortable and cooperative erstwhile club of white Dominions', led by Britain and its monarch, morphed into a forum dominated by independent, black African republics (Srinivasan 2006: 258). As immigration fears in the UK intensified and Commonwealth economic ties became untenable in the face of American and European Community ascendance, consensus on major political issues waned and British official and public sentiment became increasingly pessimistic.

It was against the backdrop of these political and economic negotiations that the Imperial Institute reinvented its purpose and forged its future. By the late 1940s, the work of the Institute as a research centre for industrial and commercial development, and as a showcase for row upon row of sample specimens detailing the colonies' natural, industrial and commercial resources, had largely been replaced with an emphasis on the human context of material production, with dioramas demonstrating the process through which the Empire's commodities were produced (Crinson 1999: 111-114). Resources were now increasingly aimed at exhibition

development and schoolchildren rather than laboratory work and industrialists. In 1949 this shift from trade and science to popular education was cemented when the Institute's scientific and technical activities were transferred elsewhere, and the Ministry of Education was allocated responsibility for the display galleries and public programmes (Annual Report 1949: 9).

Staff at the Institute, and relevant government officials, were clearly concerned about the role that the newly configured organisation might play in a changing world: in 1950, a committee was established to examine the financial viability of the Institute, the potential of the new relationship between the Institute and the Ministry of Education, and the extent to which its aims and constitution were 'in line with present-day conditions in the British Commonwealth' (Annual Report 1950: 46). The committee was led by Lord Tweedsmuir and published its report in 1952, arguing for a 'drastic revision' of purpose and nomenclature. It suggested that education should be prioritised; 'the aims, having ceased to be primarily economic, should become social and cultural in the widest sense', and the Institute should be renamed and reframed as a 'Commonwealth Institute' and a 'forum [to] further mutual understanding amongst members of Commonwealth countries by providing facilities for the presentation and exchange of ideas and information' (Ministry of Education 1952: 2, 4-5, 24). Following the publication of the report, and due to demands on the original site in South Kensington, the new Commonwealth Institute was erected in High Street Kensington's Holland Park.

Staffing changed across this period too. In February 1953, ex-colonial officer Kenneth Bradley replaced Sir Harry Lindsay as the Institute's director and a new curator, R.V. Hatt, was appointed. The configuration of the Board of Governors was also reframed at various points: members included representatives from various UK government departments (such as the Colonial Office, the Commonwealth Relations Office and the Board of Trade), but incoming High Commissioners to the UK were invited to sit on the board as their new dominions, republics and Commonwealth states were created. India had actually been represented by the (Indian-born) High Commissioner from at least 1926, but in 1958, following the passing of the Commonwealth Institute Act, Pakistan, Ceylon, Ghana and Malaya were also formally represented. Throughout the 1960s, the membership of the Board increased in direct correspondence to constitutional change across the globe. It was largely this affiliation with political and economic representatives from the UK and from decolonising countries across the former empire that forced the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes to become such dynamic spaces; this close relationship would be crucial to the ways in which they were invested with their active political functions.

Neo-colonialism at the Institute

As indicated, there was no complete 'transfer of power' from Britain to her ex-colonies during 'decolonisation'. Imperialism continued to infuse cultural, economic and political life, both in the metropole and in the (ex)colony. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the work of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes echoed these political complexities in tangible form (Crinson 1999; Craggs 2011). Crinson has argued that the new Commonwealth Institute 'merely updated [the Imperial Institute's] materials and revamped its image'; its architecture and internal layout, in particular, 'gave spatial expression to the mythology of multiculturalism while preserving the organic singularity of the host nation' (Crinson: 1999: 117-118, 120). Indeed, in many ways, the exhibitions themselves and the negotiations of those involved behind the scenes support Crinson's reading. Elements of the displays and collections, for example, continued to pay sincere homage to the Imperial Institute: while some new exhibits were developed for the Commonwealth Institute by the designer James Gardner, many of the old 'courts' which had represented South Africa, Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Fiji, British Somaliland and others at the Imperial Institute were judged recent enough to be kept, and directly transferred to the new site in Holland Park.⁴ Although it was acknowledged that the emerging Commonwealth 'cannot be expressed in a building designed to glorify Victorian imperialism',⁵ tellingly, in the new entrance hall, a silver model of the Imperial Institute stood as a reminder of the Commonwealth Institute's previous incarnation.

Given the Institute's remit as a 'contemporary museum', and its focus on trade and industry, historic collections associated with imperial exploits were regularly deaccessioned and distributed to other organisations during this time: in 1951, for example, 'relics of Captain

Cook's voyages' were transferred to the Royal Geographical Society (Annual Report 1951, 15). Yet new collections of ethnographic objects amassed under the auspices of empire continued to enter the collections unabated: in 1952 alone, Mr. Foster Nash, Assistant Warden of Mines in Malaya, donated 'a kris, three daggers and a swagger stick', the High Commissioner for Australia donated a collection of 'primitive implements and other articles' from Australia and Papua, and a Miss E.A. Midgley donated 'two carved wooden spoons and an ornamental knobkerrie from Zeerust, Bechuanaland' (Annual Report 1952: 14-15, 18). These were largely recent manufactures and thus in keeping with the Institute's emphasis on contemporary human cultures, but the objects selected, as well as their descriptions in the Annual Report, continued to portray the peoples they presumed to represent in the classical imperial ideal of the imagined, static 'other'. Even after the move to the Commonwealth Institute, ethnographic items were featured in the displays, with their stereotypical associations emphasised through dioramas such as that of the 'Aborigines-Australian Section' (Figure 1). Here, the human figures, framed by the natural world and alternating in their poses between scampering beasts and composed noble savages, directly reproduced the clichéd images which had dominated fine and popular art across the nineteenth century. Notably, a replica 'Benin Bronze', depicting Queen Idia's head, was commissioned for inclusion in the Nigeria court, its presence acting as a commemoration of British military prowess in Benin at the turn of the century, even while its status as a reproduction provided a metaphorical distance that allowed the Commonwealth Institute to disassociate itself from the violent horrors conducted in accessing the original.

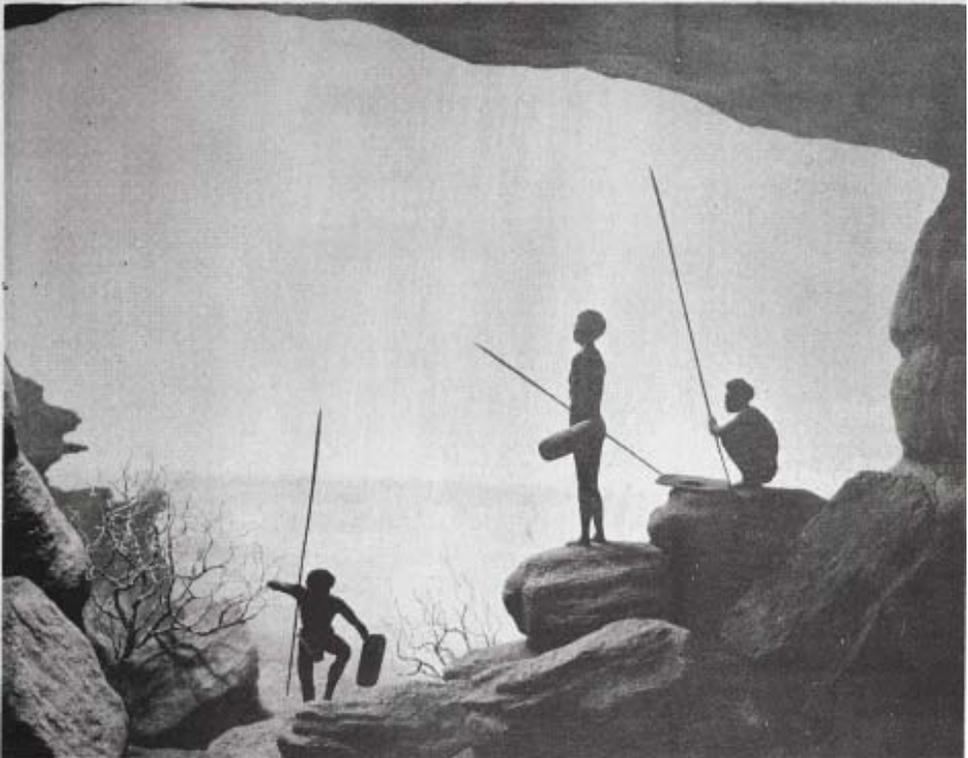


Figure 1: 'Aborigines-Australian Section' diorama, *Annual Report to the Director of the Board of Governors, London: Commonwealth Institute, 1962, pp. 16-17.* ©Commonwealth Education Trust. Image courtesy of the British Library Board.

The members of staff who had been appointed in the early 1950s were also transferred to the new site. Many of them had been administrators for the Colonial Office before they joined the Institute. Kenneth Bradley, for example, was the Institute's Director between 1953 and 1969, and had been a District Officer in Northern Rhodesia between 1926 and 1942. Lyn Shumaker, in her article on colonial officers in Rhodesia (including Bradley), describes the evolutionary standpoint held by Bradley during this period, and highlights how his agenda for economic development was tempered by his focus on an idyllic agrarian vision and his requirement that 'development' activities be confined to those that were 'culturally appropriate' to his 'backward' charges (1996: 242-3, 248-9). The implications of Bradley's presence at the new Commonwealth Institute were acknowledged by those involved: an official in the Canadian Department of External Affairs, for example, described how 'some of the old flavour endures not least in the Commonwealth views of Sir Kenneth'.⁶

Certainly, for some British stakeholders, 'the old flavour' of imperialism did endure: as plans for the new Commonwealth Institute progressed, R.S. Hudson, the British chairman of the Board of Governors, drafted a memorandum outlining his ideas. According to Hudson, the independence of the ex-colonies came with 'a full and open recognition that the United Kingdom is at once the source of those democratic institutions and values on which the new country's greatness is to be founded, and the continuing centre from which the skills, knowledge and culture essential to that greatness will come.'⁷ In this context, the new Commonwealth Institute was explicitly envisioned by Hudson as an opportunity 'for preserving our cultural leadership of the Commonwealth'.⁸ While removed from the final published report, this attitude and desire for continued control did manifest itself in the final organisation of the exhibits. In the new Institute, two new courts about the UK were developed, because, it was argued, 'the whole exhibition lacks point and centre unless there is something to show the role of the UK in the Commonwealth'.⁹

The Institute could also be a useful tool for promoting and propagandising the remains of the British Empire abroad. In 1957, in a letter to R.G. Turnbull at the Office of the Chief Secretary in Nairobi, Bradley remembered how the British government in Kenya and the Imperial Institute had worked together in a publicity campaign to support the British position during the Mau Mau Rebellion. He described how 'you asked us to do all we could to spread the truth about the situation there', and urged further funding for lectures 'to build up the reputation of the Government as an insurance against future political trouble and the inevitable misrepresentation'.¹⁰

In some senses then, the Institute acted as a device through which those involved could retain their former imperial identities and imagine a future where Britain still reigned supreme. The curating of collections, displays and public programmes allowed the Institute's stakeholders to manage certain political changes and frame particular versions of historic, contemporary and future circumstances. Once designed and made 'real', these objects, words and exhibits seemed, in turn, to convince individuals such as Bradley and Hudson, and perhaps even the audiences they catered to, of decolonisation as a limited and graceful process entirely controlled by the British.

Collaborative Futures

But while the colonial legacy of the Imperial Institute was celebrated in the new Commonwealth Institute in many ways, and some stakeholders saw both Institutes as tools with which to retain British control over the representation of Britain's former colonies and the emerging Commonwealth, in practice the organisational structures of the Commonwealth Institute, and even the Imperial Institute before it, did not allow this process to work unhindered. In fact, the role that specific individuals and the governments of newly independent nations had in paying for the Institute forced staff at the Institute to embrace the opinions of their funders and, in turn, created an Institute which genuinely celebrated the potential of independence and provided opportunities for a more radical version of decolonisation to be enacted in material form.

Key figures at the Institute - including Bradley - clearly harboured at least some pro-change sentiments: the Annual Report in 1963 stressed the need to 'throw away our old imperial spectacles', reiterating the Duke of Devonshire's recent speech at the Institute that 'the most important aspect of the Commonwealth is that it is a Commonwealth and not an Empire' (8-10).

Even in the 1940s, the Institute declared its attempt to tell the Commonwealth's 'diverse stories impartially' (Annual Report 1949: 13), and produced exhibitions such as 'British Guiana as seen by its people', where 'everyday impressions gathered by local people from their immediate surroundings' were placed on display (Annual Report 1946: 50). Many temporary and permanent exhibitions during the 1950s and 1960s were produced specifically in order to celebrate independence; the display cabinets in the Commonwealth Institute's entrance hall were regularly given over to special exhibitions of this kind.

These displays usually conformed to the regimented requirements of the same exhibition space, and often highlighted the perceived benefits of former colonial control (see, for example, the emphasis on 'The Law' and 'Democratic Rule' on the plinths displayed in the foreground of Tanganyika's independence exhibition in Figure 2). As such, they can be situated alongside the comparable phenomenon of Independence Day 'ceremonials' or celebratory events conducted across the empire to mark each moment of constitutional change. Described by David Cannadine as carefully stage-managed 'mutual expressions of esteem and good will' that temporarily concealed deep-rooted conflict and tension (2008: 657), there is inevitably a similar tone shared by both these public ceremonies and the Institute's own exhibitionary 'ceremonials'. Both can be seen as constructed by the British to signify the dignity of their apparent retreat even while emphasising continued political and economic influence. Yet the maintenance and redisplay costs of some of these exhibits (including Tanganyika's) and those of all of the permanent courts were largely borne by the countries represented, and most countries had some final approval of their exhibition scripts and themes. Both Bradley and his predecessor Harry Lindsay actively courted the opinions of each country, and genuinely seemed to imagine the Institute as a service through which the perspectives of their stakeholders – the countries of the Commonwealth – could be voiced. They forged close relationships with many nations, often drawing on the expertise and resources of London-based High Commissioners and their press, education and trade attachés. The Institute's files on Pakistan, now held at the National Archives (UK), depict the lengthy negotiations which took place in order to develop the new country's court: ideas were offered from both the Institute and staff at the High Commission, and were described and tweaked in memoranda and in face-to-face meetings at both sites over many months.¹¹ Begum Zubeida Habib Rahimtoola, the wife of the Pakistani High Commissioner, became particularly involved in the process, making frequent suggestions as to content and approach, receiving numerous tours of the developing court, commissioning new acquisitions for the Institute and taking Lindsay on a tour of the Pakistan Government Shop in order to purchase additional pieces. A.A. Abbasi, the Superintendent of the Industrial and Commercial Museum at Lahore, was also a key figure in the court's development and his offer to amass a duplicate collection for the Institute while he collected objects for his own museum was readily accepted by Lindsay.¹²

Equally, the Institute often shared and exchanged ideas and exhibits with staff at India House including unused dioramas, collections and photographs.¹³ Specific exhibits and projects were collaborative efforts: a diorama of the Taj Mahal was made by the Institute's own artist, R.T. Roussel, but was funded by the Indian businessman G.D. Birla, and based on sketches modified and finally approved by India House.¹⁴ The Institute gratefully accepted the loan of books from the High Commissioner's library in order to inform other projects such as the diorama of the Buddhist pilgrimage site, Bodhi Gaya,¹⁵ and in other cases, Lindsay asked for the High Commissioner's recommendations to fulfil certain projects: artists affiliated with and nominated by India House, including Roop and Mary Krishna and the Indian Christian artist, Alfred D. Thomas, were commissioned to execute major projects such as friezes depicting industry and cultural sites in India, and a shield bearing the Ashoka Chakra, a central symbol of the new republic.¹⁶

Lessons from contemporary museology have highlighted the limitations of 'collaborative' work between institutions and originating communities where intellectual control remains largely with the museum and is undertaken for promotional purposes only. James Clifford (1997) famously emphasised the difficulties in facilitating genuine partnership and collaboration beyond superficial consultation, and in developing museum practices which move beyond Western preconceptions of the museum to benefit all parties involved. More recently, Bernadette Lynch has highlighted how programmes described as including 'collaboration' often amount to

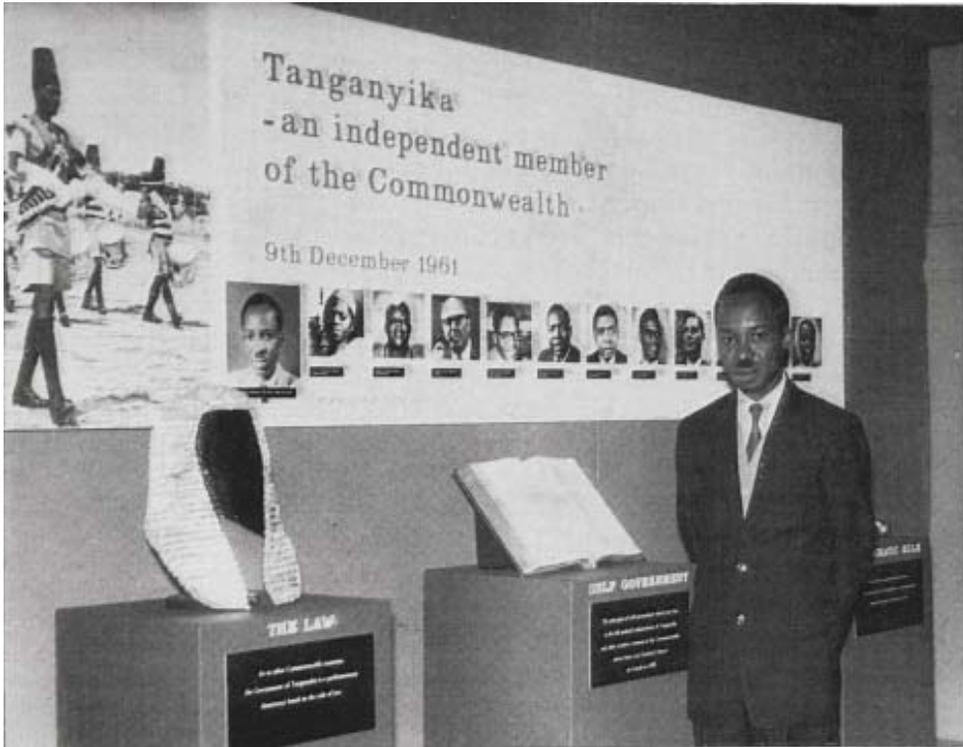


Figure 2: 'Tanganyika Independence Exhibition: visit of Mr. Julius Nyerere', Annual Report to the Director of the Board of Governors, London: Commonwealth Institute, 1961, p. 11. © Commonwealth Education Trust. Image courtesy of the British Library Board.

'passive collusion' and fail to capitalise on the potential for antagonism and conflict to promote creativity (2011: 153). Certainly, work at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes did not constitute the best practice programmes that are being forged today: the products of the collaboration described above were not only framed by financial motivations but by the legacy of long-standing modes of curation at the Institute, and they were often aligned with the preformed ideas of curatorial staff. Roop and Mary Krishna's friezes, for example, were informed by similar pieces already on display in the Canadian Court and a series of requirements outlined by the Institute.¹⁷ While the artists had their own creative influences, and were endorsed by India House, Lindsay originally selected them based on his idea that Roop, in particular, was 'capable of turning out the sort of frieze we want'.¹⁸ In plans for the new Commonwealth Institute, while individual courts were to 'retain their own identity', each was subject to 'an underlying discipline' (Commonwealth Institute 1966: 26) and 'co-ordinated to form a whole'.¹⁹

Furthermore, behind the publicity and rhetoric, the interactions detailed above were not always smooth: the annual reports and public guides to the exhibitions were clearly a space to frame the work of the Institute in a positive light, but internal memos from within the organisation, and those written by the external bodies with which it worked, betray the frequent struggles and frustrations that occurred. A confidential document detailing the complexities of funding the Institute, probably authored by Bradley around 1957, described the demands of overseas governments as one of 'the difficulties to be overcome'; here, he begrudged the fact that those who contributed financially 'sometimes try to dictate to the Institute as to the content of their exhibitions or, worse still, insist on carrying out the work themselves'.²⁰ The South African government, in particular, was berated for its 'aesthetically deplorable and educationally

inadequate' contribution, and Canada's 1948 exhibition was similarly dismissed as 'suitable only for a Trade Fair.'²¹ The Canadian Cultural Affairs Division, for one, were fully aware of these underlying attitudes, suggesting that these complaints were made 'rather more from administrative than aesthetic considerations'.²² A spokesperson from the Cultural Affairs Division added how the Institute 'is anxious to project its own image of the Commonwealth, which is not necessarily our own, and is impatient with the views of individual member countries.'²³ Inevitably, much of the Institute's practices can be placed in the context of wider political rhetoric which imagined 'partnership' as a surrogate for paternalistic trusteeship (see Hyam 2006: 90).

Yet these tensions do not invalidate much of the work done by the staff at Institute that successfully cast the countries involved as actors rather than passive beneficiaries, or the role that its exhibitions and public programmes took in framing and forging decolonisation. Indeed, the tensions exhibited in internal memoranda are actually in line with what Lynch (2011: 154-58) has recently identified as potential best practice for museums of the future: the staff at the Institute were at least honest about the problems inherent in the negotiations with the countries involved and, in some ways, capitalised on these creative clashes with their 'friendly adversaries'. In the end, despite not conforming to Bradley's wishes, Canada still retained creative control over its court; the countries of the Commonwealth were not simply excluded or dictated to by agendas set by the Institute but they were encouraged, at least in part, to make and shape these agendas too. Perhaps the complex politics of constitutional decolonisation promoted a scenario where confrontation was to be expected and thus curatorial programmes at the Institute were advanced on more realistic and equal terms than one might anticipate.

As Ruth Craggs (2011: 264) has suggested, then, the displays at the Commonwealth Institute, and arguably the Imperial Institute before it, were not simply straightforward celebrations of empire, or, later, smoke screens for neo-colonial attitudes. Despite the previous histories of figures like Bradley and Lindsay (who had been a Trade Commissioner for India in his earlier career), respect across cultures, if encouraged by financial dependency, is evident in their work for the Institute. Lynn Shumaker (1996: 243) makes the important point that not all those involved in the Empire harboured identical authoritarian attitudes; consultation and exchange existed during the heyday of the British Empire and it is also worth acknowledging that individuals can display different attitudes throughout their lives. While Bradley clearly did have lingering sympathies for British imperialism and strived for intellectual control when in post at the Institute, he also saw his organisation as a space to engage with what he genuinely saw to be a transfer of power and the end of empire. For the curatorial staff at the Institute, as empire crumbled, the galleries were a space to trial, enact and even embrace a world where the British were no longer the sole decision makers. This was a complex situation, where collaboration between directors, curators, governors and politicians was influenced by financial circumstances. In fact, it was arguably the organisational and funding structures of the Institute that encouraged individuals such as Lindsay and Bradley to embrace decolonisation, even where they retained imperial tendencies elsewhere.

Commonwealth Agendas

The previous two sections of this article have outlined how the Institute acted as a tool for the British individuals involved – for both retaining and sharing power, but individuals and governmental bodies in the Dominions and ex-colonies also had political agendas that were realised and shaped through the Institute. This final section will draw attention to the ways in which these stakeholders harnessed the organisation, and how it helped them to negotiate the complexities of decolonisation too.

Craggs has discussed the use of the Commonwealth Institute in the 1960s by immigrants residing in the residential areas around west London. She rightly concludes that 'to think of the Institute solely in terms of the spectacle of 'out there' performed for those 'at home' misses some of the ways that it worked for Commonwealth... communities' themselves (2011: 257). Indeed, visiting politicians and High Commissioners representing the independent countries of the Commonwealth also regularly visited the space. In 1966 alone, the High Commissioners for Barbados, Ceylon, Gambia, Ghana, Guyana, Jamaica and Malta each used the Institute to host their own receptions in the exhibition galleries (Annual Report 1966: 31).

Bradley noted how, during his 1959 trip to India, Pakistan and Ceylon, he found these countries' governments 'anxious to take advantage of any educational services' offered by the Institute (Annual Report 1959: 10), while a visit by the Deputy Director to Nigeria and Ghana yielded similar results (Annual Report 1960: 7).

Explicitly anti-colonial, anti-Commonwealth and nationalist agendas were given expression throughout: a confidential memorandum in the Institute's archives describes how debates over the name and purpose of the new Institute had been fraught, with funds from India, Malaya and Ghana withheld until the Imperial title was changed.²⁴ Even in the end, Canada, South Africa and India registered their formal disapproval of the new name and plans for the Commonwealth Institute.²⁵ India had apparently 'hinted that for political reasons a minimum amount of attention should be paid to the British connection' in a planned exhibition.²⁶ Its display included a life-size statue of M.K. Gandhi, wrapped in the homespun *chadar* (shawl) that symbolised his dismissal of Western 'civilisation' and calls for Indian self-sufficiency from British imports. Both India and Pakistan refused to have a statuette of Lord Clive, the British officer who established East India Company rule in Bengal, exhibited in their courts.²⁷ Politics and design explicitly collided when Burma, South Africa and Aden removed their funding and displays as they each left the Commonwealth.

Emerging nations clearly saw the Institute as a useful space to depict their independent identities. As discussed above, in December 1961, an exhibition to mark Tanganyika's independence was explicitly commissioned by the country's new government. It included exhibits selected by the High Commissioner, Dunstan Omari, and was visited by the new Prime Minister, Julius Nyerere, during his visit to London that year (Figure 2). By 1964, Bradley (1964: 28) was forced to express his exhaustion over the constant pressure on his team to reconstruct specific national exhibits from individual governments who were willing to pay to see their countries represented in an up-to-date fashion. Correspondence between divisions in Canada's Department of External Affairs show how certain officials saw their participation in the work of the Institute as 'an opportunity, chiefly at the expense of the British Ministry of Education, to inform British young people about Canada, to win their goodwill, and – most important – to interest them in later emigration to Canada.'²⁸ The development of a new exhibition in 1967 was explicitly aimed at 'debunking the traditional myths by underlining Canada's technological, industrial and political maturity.'²⁹

India, too, commissioned exhibits which promoted her technological prowess in a modernising world. Displays in the Indian court, as the guide to the Institute explained, aimed to tell the history of the subcontinent's development in 'an orderly sequence': the exhibits began 'with the Aryan immigrations of 3000 BC and [took] the story right up to modern times... ranging from primitive village industries... to the development of modern industries and transport, culminating in a large, dramatically illuminated working model of the great steel works at Jamshedpur' (see Figure 3) (Commonwealth Institute 1966: 41-42). Such displays, which apparently emphasised the 'grand climax' of British intervention in Indian history and produced a teleological view of inevitable progress towards 'Western' modernity, could easily be slotted into critiques of the Commonwealth Institute which argue that the galleries showed British audiences a 'spectacular dominance over the world of the Commonwealth' (Crinson 1999: 120), or demonstrated the continued benefits of British imperialism in India. India's 'traditional' cultures and its economic potential had long been the staples of a colonial exhibitionary discourse which sought to display the empire's 'Jewel in the Crown' as known, ordered and owned (e.g. Breckenridge 1989). As Anandi Ramamurthy (2006) argues, even after independence, visual depictions of new infrastructure and economic development in the ex-colonies continued to be associated with neo-colonial discourses, providing 'evidence' of the benefits of modernisation theory and justifying continued British intervention.

However, a detailed examination of the Indian exhibition's contents and the circumstances of its commission and construction reveal a more complex scenario than this. As we have seen, staff at the Indian High Commission played a key role in the development of their court at the Institute, dictating and approving various elements of the displays. Businessman G.D. Birla funded the dioramas depicting Indian Mughal and Buddhist history, while the factory which provided the climax of the display, and the surrounding company town of Jamshedpur, were both controlled by the Indian-owned Tata Iron and Steel Company.



Figure 3: 'Indian Section: The Tata Steel Works at Jamshedpur', Commonwealth Institute (1966) Commonwealth Institute: A Guide Describing the Work of the Institute and the Exhibitions in the Galleries, London: Commonwealth Institute, 34. © Commonwealth Education Trust. Image by permission of the University of Brighton Design Archives.

Industrialisation may have been a central component of modernisation theory, and a key element of what has often been described as a Euro-American concept of modernity, but the Indian nationalist movement was also predicated on technics and industry (Prakash 1999). Furthermore, as Rebecca Brown (2009, 9-10) has recently confirmed, modernity was not only a Western category, but one constituted in and articulated by the colonies themselves. For Indian nationalists, science and technology was at the crux of their anti-colonial struggle (Prakash, 1999: 11). British government and business had impoverished the Indian nation, throttling its industries and exploiting its resources for the British people's benefit. In direct reaction to these circumstances, members of the Indian National Congress drew on imagined ideals of traditional village life and community *and* India's unique industrial and technological heritage (as well as the Soviet Union's programme of industrialisation) to shape a policy where technical education for Indians and Indian ownership of industry would halt the drain of wealth from India to Britain (Prakash 1999: 178-198). Much of this rhetoric was actually forged by the indigenous business elite itself: complex relations with British business and government notwithstanding, both Birla and the Tata Group's founder, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, informed and shaped strident critiques of colonialism as they pursued their goals of independent capitalist development (Kudaisya and Chin-keong 2009: 8-9; Lockwood 2012). Equally, in the run up to independence, key players in the Indian National Congress emphasised the importance of the Indian steel industry and industrialisation for self-rule: Jamshedpur was a 'regular halt on the itinerary of many of India's key leaders and freedom fighters' (Lala 2007: 44). Whilst clearly still referencing European visual traditions of imagining the 'other', one could also argue that Indian nationalism had long been depicted in a comparable range of visual and exhibitionary forms (Brown, 2009; Gonyo, 2013; Greenhough, 1995). As Kavita Singh has argued for India's National Museum inaugurated in New Delhi in 1949, despite also being 'stalked by the ghosts of a colonial museum', 'the simple fact of its establishment in its particular place, in its particular place in time', gave it sufficient symbolic meaning to function 'as an assertion of India as a sovereign land' (2003: 190, 194). Similarly, both the historic and contemporary dioramas of India at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes acted as an important assertion of Indian nationalism on British soil.

The Institute also had a role to play in forging future political associations beyond colonialism and nationalism. It was representatives from Canada, again, who understood the networking function of the organisation, linking participation in the work of the Commonwealth Institute directly to wider political issues: according to memoranda in the Department of External

Affairs, their personnel sometimes felt 'compelled to "go along with" the activities of the Institute, because failure to do so would set Canada against the other senior members of the Commonwealth (which are more friendly towards the activities of the Institute)'. There were specific concerns that 'Canadian unwillingness would in any case be taken as a sign of disinterest in or dissatisfaction with the Commonwealth.'³⁰

Conclusion

We might conclude by asking what this case study tells us about 'decolonisation' as a phenomenon more generally. An investigation of the British attitudes towards such an institution allows us to contest the myth of the grace of imperial decline, but also to highlight the 'ruptures and uneven transformations which began to break into the inherited systems' of imperialism (Schwarz 2006: 267) and emphasise the complex experiences and agendas of individuals. Importantly, an examination of the archives of newly independent and decolonising countries reminds us that decolonisation was influenced not only by the acts of metropolitan governments, forced to relinquish power, but also by colonial subjects (Rothermund 2006: 2). Independent countries were influential in how they were represented, and influenced the shifting nature of the Institute. Ultimately, for all parties – the former colonisers, and the multiple and various formerly colonised – the tale of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes demonstrates the protracted and complex process of decolonisation: as in the wider political sphere, relations between institutions at the centre of the former empire and representatives of the former colonies could be antagonistic and cooperative at the same time. Certainly this was the case at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes, and the displays are not just neo-colonial, but reflect this ambivalence as a result.

I would like to suggest that this focus on Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes supports recent claims by Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy (2006: 7) that visual culture directly impacted upon decolonisation, particularly in the way in which it enabled the negotiation of these new experiences. As shown, the Institute did more than manifest or mirror the broader political changes taking place around it: it was the very organisational and funding structures of both Institutes that pushed staff members to embrace decolonisation, forcing them to take their funders seriously as stakeholders and collaborators. The very process of designing exhibitions to represent a changing world – of visualising and materialising the global shifts around them – seems to have acted upon these individuals' thinking and engagement with the realities of political change. In other ways, a range of stakeholders in the UK and elsewhere saw strategies of display and acquisition as a way to come to terms with and affect political change: for the Institute's Chairman, the displays could preserve some semblance of cultural leadership over a rapidly changing Commonwealth; for the Canadians, participating in the cultural practices centred on the Institute provided an important signal of political interest and alliance with other countries. Museums, collections, and exhibitions are products but also agents of social and political change; they reveal but also shape civilisations (Kaplan 1994; Knell et al., 2007). In the context of wider political shifts in the twentieth century, the Institutes responded to, masked and actively mediated decolonisation; they were highly influential in practices of identity formation, political negotiation and economic development during this period. Indeed, it could be suggested that the Institute was an arena for trialling and enacting forms of decolonisation, neo-colonialism, independence and anti-colonial resistance, and acted as a microcosm of wider political encounters.

Today, where contemporary museum practice is characterised by international consultancy and collaboration, and institutions are developing satellite branches all over the world, the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes provide a historical case study of the role of cultural diplomacy in politics, and the impact that political frameworks can have on the presentation of cultural forms such as exhibitions and museums. Equally, governments and practitioners alike can be mindful of the impact that such cultural projects can, in turn, have on politics, because processes of visualisation and the negotiations required for their production can act upon international relations in a multitude of ways.

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Notes

- ¹ See also Jo Littler's excellent work on the Festival of Britain (2006), where she discusses the relationship of the Festival to decolonisation and the way in which it negotiated a continuing legacy of colonialism. Crinson (1999) also makes this point in relation to the Commonwealth and Imperial institutes. His work will be discussed below.
- ² The article covers the period 1945-1970, and explores themes which apply to both the Imperial Institute and the Commonwealth Institute. As 1958 did not mark a radical break in the ideology or practice of the Institute, the two organisations are used interchangeably throughout. Readers are reminded that the Imperial Institute refers to the organisation before the passing of the Commonwealth Institute Act in March 1958, when the name of the Institute was legally changed.
- ³ In this I am implicitly indebted to recent work on the agency of objects and the ways in which humans and material cultures are connected (see, for example, Latour, 2005; Gell, 1998, and Gosden, et al., 2007).
- ⁴ Notes for discussion of terms of contracts..., c. 1958. ED121/816. National Archives, Kew (NA).
- ⁵ The Future of the Imperial Institute, 12 May 1954. ED121/808. NA.
- ⁶ R Collins, Information Division, 18 July 1967. RG25 Volume 15112 File no. 55-4-CWLTH INST Part 2. Library and Archives, Canada (LAC).
- ⁷ The Future of the Imperial Institute, April 1956. ED121/808. NA.
- ⁸ The Future of the Imperial Institute, April 1956. ED121/808. NA.
- ⁹ J Hudson to S Wright (Treasury), 15 October 1958. ED121/816. NA.
- ¹⁰ K Bradley to R Turnbull, 18 November 1957. PRO 30/76/195. NA.
- ¹¹ Internal memoranda and correspondence. PRO 30/76/129. NA.
- ¹² Memorandum re: Visit of Mr A.A. Abbasi. PRO 30/76/129. NA.
- ¹³ Internal memoranda. PRO 30/76/119. NA.
- ¹⁴ Internal memoranda, March 1950. PRO 30/76/119. NA.
- ¹⁵ H Lindsay to J Coelho, India House, 26 July 1950. PRO 30/76/119. NA.
- ¹⁶ H Lindsay to Dr Kaumudi, India House, 21 November 1951. PRO 30/76/192. NA.; internal memoranda, 17 April 1946, PRO 30/76/119. NA.
- ¹⁷ Internal memoranda, 17 April 1946; Harry Lindsay to Roop Krishna, 1 Jan 1947. PRO 30/76/119. National Archives, Kew.
- ¹⁸ H Lindsay, 12 December 1946. PRO 30/76/119. NA.

- ¹⁹ J Hudson to S Wright (Treasury), 15 October 1958. ED121/816. NA.
- ²⁰ Report on Imperial Institute's Grants from Overseas Governments, c. 1957. PRO 30/76/816. NA.
- ²¹ Report on Imperial Institute's Grants from Overseas Governments, c. 1957. PRO 30/76/816. NA.
- ²² G Southam, Information Division, April 8 1963. RG25 Volume 5336 File no. 10033-40 Part 4. LAC.
- ²³ M Dench, Cultural Affairs Division, to M Wershof, Office of the Under-Secretary of State, July 25 1966. RG25 Volume 15112 File no. 55-4-CWLTH INST Part 2. LAC.
- ²⁴ Report on Imperial Institute's Grants from Overseas Governments, c. 1957. PRO 30/76/816. NA.
- ²⁵ The Future of the Imperial Institute, 12 May 1954. ED121/808. NA.
- ²⁶ Report on Imperial Institute's Grants from Overseas Governments, c. 1957. PRO 30/76/816. NA.
- ²⁷ Report on Imperial Institute's Grants from Overseas Governments, c. 1957. PRO 30/76/816. NA; H Lindsay, 12 November 1947. PRO 30/76/129. NA.
- ²⁸ Commonwealth Division to Information Division, December 14 1966. RG25 Volume 15112 File no. 55-4-CWLTH INST Part 2. LAC.
- ²⁹ Meeting minutes, July 17 1967. RG25 Volume 15112 File no. 55-4-CWLTH INST Part 2. LAC.
- ³⁰ Canada's Relations with the Commonwealth Institute, June 20 1963. RG25 Volume 5336 File no. 10033-40 Part 4. LAC.

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