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Seminario Scienze Umanistiche

**ARTS, THE REALITY OF MUSEUMS AND
TRANSCULTURAL CROSSROADS:
Museum Rhetorics and Contested Ownership of
Cultural Heritage**

Prof.ssa Eva-Maria Troelenberg
Utrecht University

3-4 maggio 2021

Taking its cue from museum history, this class will look at the politics and political frameworks that have been connected to the interpretation, valuation and conservation of artworks and other items of visual cultural heritage during the modern period up to today. A particular focus will be on the circulation of artworks between political systems, institutions and frameworks of interpretation, as represented by museums. This includes e.g. perspectives on the political history of museums, on preservation and ownership of cultural heritage, or on the relation between assumed centers and peripheries of the contemporary global art world.

Session 1, Monday 3 May 2021, 10.30-13.30

Museums and their Rhetorics – An Introduction

I will give a lecture introduction, followed by a discussion in class. Students will read in preparation for this class:

- Troelenberg, Eva-Maria. "Introduction", in: Eva-Maria Troelenberg and Melania Savino (eds.): *Images of the Art Museum* (Boston 2017), 1-27. <https://doi.org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1515/9783110341362-001>

- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "Empty the museum, decolonize the curriculum, open theory", in: *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2017), 6-22. <https://icamiamsi.org.storage.googleapis.com/2017/06/ef8570cc-mirzoeff-empty-the-museum-open-theory-decolonize-learning-.pdf>



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In order to prepare the discussion, keep these questions in mind while reading:

- Can you think of Museums which reminded you of a 'temple' or rather as a 'forum' for art? How was this effect achieved? What is the difference between these two notions? Do you take many images when you visit a museum? Why or why not, and what is the purpose of these images?

- The text by **Nicholas Mirzoeff** mentions quite a number of theoretical writers from different backgrounds and disciplines. Pick two of them and collect a bit of background on them: What have they written, which political discourses were/are they involved in, what disciplines do they come from?

During the online seminar sessions, we will divide the class into breakout rooms: Each of these questions will be discussed by one smaller group of students, before we bring the discussion results back to the plenary session.

Session 2, Monday 3 May, 15.00-16.30

Online Exhibition visit: MOED – Museum of Equality and Difference
<https://moed.online/current-exhibitions/>

Students will use the first half hour of the session to browse the online exhibitions and concepts of MOED and take critical notes about the topics, questions and the material presented in this page.

Live seminar session begins at 15.30. We will discuss the approach of MOED again in smaller groups in breakout rooms and connect it to critical issues which have been raised in the previous introduction.

Session 3, Tuesday 4 May, 10.00-13.30

Universalism and Ownership of Cultural Heritage

Lecture: The Example of the British Museum: You have time to watch the pre-recorded clip between 10 and 11am.

Live seminar session begins at 11.15.



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Read:

- Cuno, James: "View from the universal museum. Appendix: Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums", in: John Henry Merryman (ed.): *Imperialism, art and restitution* (Cambridge 2006) 15-36.

- Singh, Kavita: "The Universal Museum: View from Below", in: *Witnesses to History: A Compendium of Documents and Writings on the Return of Cultural Objects*, ed. Lyndel V. Prott (United Nations Educational 2009), 123-29.

Questions to keep in mind while reading, in preparation for the discussion:
What is a 'universal museum'? How do **Cuno** and **Singh** define it, and what are their arguments for or against this kind of institution? Have you heard of cases of art restitution in the last years? What were their political circumstances?

Session 4, Tuesday 4 May, 14.30-16.30

Contested Ownership – Postcolonial Perspectives

During the first hour, watch a documentary on Africa's looted Art (ca. 45 mins).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RXIVr_15JY

Live seminar session begins at 15.30h.

Read in preparation for the discussion after the film:

- Bienkowski, Piotr, 'A Critique of Museum Restitution and Repatriation Practices', in: Sharon Macdonald and Kylie Message, *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies vol. 2* (London et al. 2015), pp. 431-453.
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1002/9781118829059.wbihms219>

- Kavita Singh, 'Repatriation without Patria', in: *Journal of Material Culture* 2/15 (2010), 131-155.
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1177%2F1359183510364079>

Questions to keep in mind while reading to prepare the discussion:

- The text by **Piotr Bienkowski** gives an overview over the terminologies and mechanisms which play a role in the process of restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage. Politically significant claims for restitution refer to the Parthenon Marbles from the Athens Acropolis, now kept at the British Museum, or to the Benin Bronzes, now spread across museums worldwide. What do you



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think could be good practices in dealing with them? In which way are they similar or different from each other?

- **Kavita Singh**'s text takes the example of Tibet to show a typical problem that often occurs in debates about restitution of cultural heritage: the country or community of origin may not exist anymore in the same way it existed when an artefact was taken away from it. Restitutions of historical artefacts are then often related to political constellations of the present. Singh identifies several types of 'object flows' which can work in this context. How does she describe particularly the role of museums in these processes?



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