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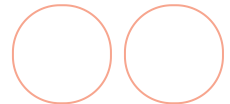
'Moral case' for change is overwhelming, says Culture& CEO Errol Francis

23 July 2020 BLACK LIVES MATTER



Geraldine Kendall Adams @Gkendall

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Errol Francis

Portrait by Phil Sayer

As Black Lives Matter protests swept across the UK last month, museum and heritage organisations expressed their solidarity with the protesters' calls to end racial injustice. But a charter from the arts and education charity Culture& is calling on such institutions to do more to “decolonise their relationship with the UK black community”. The charity, which promotes diversity in the workplace, has published a [charter of recommendations](#) to spur the sector to follow up on its pledges.

“We do not believe that such statements are credible unless they are backed up with actions which we recommend,” says the charter.

Culture& CEO, Errol Francis, says the recommendations were developed with help from students in the charity's New Museum School programme after seeing the response from museums in the wake of the alleged murder of George Floyd by US police officers, which sparked outrage worldwide.

Francis says the students had found it difficult to “square the statements of support from museums” with the unresolved nature of the sector's own relationship with colonial violence. He adds that the murder of George Floyd echoed previous acts of brutality against black people in the custody of British police and psychiatric services, about which little has been said.

“We've been talking about what Black Lives Matter has to do with museums. If it's about violence to black people – in what way are they connected?” says Francis.

He says there are clear parallels between modern-day injustices against colonial people and the traces of colonial violence in museum collections, like the Benin Bronzes that were brought to Britain in 1897 after a brutal punitive expedition in what is now Nigeria.

He says the sudden surge of protests meant that there had not been time to form a “clear set of demands” for the heritage sector, and the charter is intended to rectify that.

The seven-point charter calls on museums to follow up their statements with “statements of support to the UK black communities in relation to black people who have died in similar circumstances in Britain”.

It says museums should “support decolonising collections and the imperial narratives around objects in museum collections”, giving “giving clear and explicit information to audiences on the history of the object and its acquisition”. It calls on museums to commit to rewording and editing racist and outdated artwork titles and descriptions.

It also calls for the restitution of colonial-era objects acquired by force, and for reparations to be paid “where museums have profited from the ownership and display of cultural property”.

The charter says arts and heritage organisations should be held accountable for their action on diversity by funders like Arts Council England, and that they should take steps to “take steps to holistically protect the mental health, wellbeing, and lives of their Black workforce”.

Finally, the charter says the sector must “must take steps to protect the lives of their Black workforce and audiences who face disproportionate risks relating to Covid-19”.

Francis made headlines earlier this week after an interview with the Guardian that drew parallels between colonial art in museums and Nazi-spoliated works. He says his views had been somewhat taken out of context and were intended to be more nuanced.

"The comparison is not irrelevant," he says. "These are artworks seized in times of war. But I'm not making any moral comparison between colonial regimes and what happened under the Nazis." He adds, though, that recent comments by the historian David Starkey made it clear that there is a general failure to recognise the "genocidal consequences of colonialism".

Francis says he believes there should be an international registry of colonial-era objects with disputed provenance, similar to the system already in place for Nazi-looted works.

Francis is hopeful that the impetus for action in the heritage sector - and more widely - won't be slowing down.

"The moral case has now become overwhelming," he says. "It's unstoppable."

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