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Colonial art in UK museums is similar to Nazi-looted works, says charity boss

Dr Errol Francis said venues should support decolonisation of their collections

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Colonial-era artefacts taken by British forces should be regarded in the same way as Nazi-looted art, according to the director of an arts charity who is calling for a dramatic overhaul of the sector in response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Dr Errol Francis, CEO and artistic director of Culture&, released an “agenda for action” consisting of a seven-point charter, which says galleries and museums should support the decolonisation of their collections, start restitution processes and reword artwork titles that are racially sensitive.

Francis told the Guardian it was hypocritical for institutions, including the British Museum, to make statements in support of Black Lives Matter when they possess items taken by force from African nations, such as the Benin Bronzes that were looted in 1897.

He said: “I think that the provenance thing is very similar to the works that were seized by the Nazis. It should be considered in the same way and objects that were taken illegally should be returned.”

“The museums themselves have this relationship with colonial violence. So when they made these statements about supporting Black Lives Matter, I think it actually drew it attention to their own complicity in similar acts,” Francis added.

Hartwig Fischer, the British Museum’s director, wrote a blog in June that said the museum stands in solidarity with “the British Black community, with the African American community, with the Black community throughout the world,” and was “aligned with the spirit and soul of Black Lives Matter everywhere.”

Several prominent galleries and museums responded to the Black Lives Matter movement with public statements of support, with Tate and Somerset House committing to creating internal anti-racism taskforces, while the V&A said it would plan “public programming directly connected to global histories”.

The Barbican released a six-point plan, which includes “removing institutional barriers” for black employees and having “open conversations with our staff”, while the Science Museum said it would publish its “equity framework” this summer. The Southbank Centre said it was consulting with staff before responding.

Other institutions, including the The National Gallery were criticised for their responses which made no mention of George Floyd whose death triggered worldwide protest, or the Black Lives Matter movement. Artist Evan Ifekoya, who is the only permanently employed black member of academic staff within the art department at Goldsmiths, said they were withdrawing their labour because of what they described as “institutional, structural and economic” racism.

Francis says many of the institutional responses rang “hollow” or were too vague, and lacked concrete plans, commitment of resources and investment.

“In some ways, I think for a lot of the people who put up these statements or the black squares, it was almost like an expression of white guilt or shame. We want to highlight the contradictions and say to people, if you want to support this campaign, these are the things you have to do,” he added.

In an interview with the BBC Fischer said institutions have to deal with the fact “slavery has been an integral part of the European economy for centuries” and it needs to be addressed. “We need to widen the scope, we need to deepen the work and look at the history of our institution as a whole,” he added.

Last year, former culture secretary Jeremy Wright ruled out returning objects held in national museums favouring what he called “cultural cooperation” and long-term loans instead.

Legislation currently prevents national institutions from returning looted items in their collections, except in the case of art stolen during the Nazi-era. The Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act gives institutions the power to return items in their collections to their original owners or heirs. Before its enforcement, national museums were prevented from returning the items.

A spokesperson said the British Museum stood by its BLM statement, adding: “We are committed to an ongoing review of how we present objects, including being open about the history of the collection.

“We are currently in the process of rethinking how we display the Benin collections, fully acknowledging how they entered the museum. Additionally, we are considering how we can represent a range of perspectives on the collections within the displays, including through

building upon our close working relationship with Nigerian partners, and representing a range of other public voices.”

The charter was compiled by Culture& and participants of its The New Museum School initiative, which places BAME trainees in cultural institutions. It also called for statements of support for black Britons who had been the victims of police violence, and diverse programming that appealed to black audiences. It recommends that public funding bodies, such as Arts Council England, should make institutions more accountable and create measurable targets with regards to diversity and anti-racism.

Francis said that without change, British cultural institutions could alienate a whole generation of young people who will turn away from them. “I think that young people will really not want to engage with museums and the risk is alienating a whole new generation of people. That is the big risk,” he said.

“The current approach is going to create more alienation, not just from BAME communities, but young white people who are just as passionate about this thing, which we saw when they tore down the Colston statue.”

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