



Culture

Black Lives Matter: Museums should not destroy the spoils of our colonial past – but put them in context, says arts charity chief

Dr Errol Francis says that no matter how impassioned a museum's statement condemning racism is, action is the only meaningful currency

By **David Styles**

August 27, 2020 6:00 am

Updated August 27, 2020 1:36 pm



The British Museum has removed a bust of its slave-owning founder Hans Sloane from its grandiose plinth (Photo: Daniel Leal-Olivas/AFP/Getty)

George Floyd's killing sparked a frenzied period when museums seemed to be falling over themselves to express solidarity with the **Black Lives Matter movement**. Encouraged by this outpouring, the London-based arts charity **Culture&** published a Black Lives Matter Charter for the heritage sector.

The call went out for organisations that were seeking support with the process of decolonising their collections to get in touch. But several weeks on, only one museum and one industry body have made contact, the charity says. That museum was the Wellcome Collection, whose director is Melanie Keen.

Dr Errol Francis, CEO and artistic director of Culture&, says: "The first major UK museum with a black director – **Wellcome Collection** – is the only one to engage. That is very telling." A recent report revealed that only 15 per cent of board members and 10 per cent of all CEOs at National Portfolio Organisations are from non-white backgrounds.





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Dr Errol Francis, head of Culture&, says the British Museum continues to display the Benin Bronzes, even though they were acquired through 'genocidal violence' in 1897 (Photo: John Walton/PA)

Actions speak louder than words

Francis says that no matter how impassioned a museum's statement condemning racism is, action is the only meaningful currency. "In some ways the institutions that haven't spoken out have been more honest." For those that did, he says, "if anything, making the statements drew attention to the museums' failures on these matters".

This is an area in which the Wellcome Collection draws praise from Culture&'s boss. "Their statement uses very different language to others. It is far more self-critical and refers directly to White supremacy in its collections and the idea of anti-Blackness as a specific oppressive experience."



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By contrast, an infamous blog post by British Museum director Hartwig Fischer that expressed support for "everyone who is denied equal rights and protection from violence in the fullest sense of these terms" struck many as hypocritical, given that the site has dragged its feet on repatriation and restitution.

The Benin Bronzes in its collection, for example, remain on show despite having been acquired through "genocidal violence" in 1897, according to Francis. "We recognise that we must continue to change and there is much more to do," a British Museum spokesperson told **i**. "We are committed to an ongoing review of how we present objects, including being open about the history of the collection."

This week, the institution announced it has moved a bust of its founder, **Sir Hans Sloane, from a grandiose plinth to a cabinet alongside other artefacts that explore his links to the slave trade.**

Alterations to the way the Benin collections are displayed and "fully acknowledging how they entered the museum" are also under consideration.



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Statues should be reinterpreted, not destroyed

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Francis sympathises with the sentiment behind calls for removal, but fears what it could mean for historical objects.

A better solution, he says, can be found in the work of artist Yinka Shonibare. The Turner Prize nominee held two National Gallery exhibitions, *Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads* (1998) and *Scratch the Surface* (2007), in which mixed media artworks directly responded to the slave trading realities of paintings by Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds."

It makes a statement but doesn't destroy anything. When people are discussing removal we should be steering the conversation onto reinterpretation, because destroying pieces of history sets a very dangerous precedent," Francis says.

Change won't be quick, he feels. "It will take time for people to discuss, understand, accept or even reject the charter. This was always going to be a long struggle."

This post has been updated to include the name of the museum director, Melanie Keen.

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