

[00:00:00] **Tamsin:** Swathi, do you remember the last museum that you went to?

[00:00:07] **Swathi:** I think I went to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.

[00:00:11] **Tamsin:** I don't think I've been there. So what did you see when you were there?

[00:00:14] **Swathi:** Oh, from what I can remember, there was a section for Formula One cars and stuffed birds, and there was one area with stuff from different parts of the world. I could remember India.

[00:00:23] **Tamsin:** So when you were there, did you think about how the things in the museum, the exhibits and the artefacts you mentioned, actually ended up there?

[00:00:29] **Swathi:** I have not thought about it.

[00:00:31] **Tamsin:** So for this episode, I had the chance to learn about how the University of Aberdeen is dealing with the colonial legacy of its collections.

We talked about the role of museums and the histories that they represent or exclude.

[00:00:42] **Swathi:** I'm really curious to hear about it.

[00:00:44] **Rachel Smith:** Well, the topic today is decolonising museums. That's something I've been teaching. My name's Rachel Smith, and I'm a lecturer. I teach in the Anthropology programs and in the Museum Studies program at the university.

[00:01:08] **Swathi:** You're listening to Beyond Boundaries from the University of Aberdeen. I'm Swati. And I'm Tamsin.

[00:01:23] **Rachel Smith:** So, what are we talking about today? What's your specialty? We're trying to encourage our students as part of a broader, uh, move within the university to think about the colonial aspects of the curriculum and how we can decolonise, uh, teaching. To encourage students to think about the museum as well and, and how the museum's been entangled with colonial histories and the efforts that, uh, museums are making to try and decolonise,

although that itself is a word that some people are quite hesitant about or critical about.

[00:01:55] **Tamsin:** So what does it actually mean? What's decolonisation?

[00:01:58] **Rachel Smith:** That's the 10,000 question, really. There's lots of different aspects, of course. A lot of people would argue that museums, especially in Europe, but also internationally, they were born at the same time with colonialism. A lot of the collections, the objects in museums were obtained through different colonial activities.

Sometimes that was military activities. Sometimes that was missionaries bringing things back or scientists going out to different places and studying and bringing back different specimens. But it was all really entwined with, um, colonial histories in different ways. And that's something we really want to encourage our students to understand, but also to look at the ways that museums have historically represented other peoples, including indigenous and racialised peoples. The way that these objects were displayed often really told quite an imperial or colonial story, or they often hid the perspectives of racialised and indigenous peoples as well.

Um, and there's been a lot of activity and acknowledgement within museums about that, especially in recent years, and efforts to try and address some of these histories and think about what museums can do differently or how they could even make people aware of these histories as well.

Certainly I think the word decolonising we're hearing much more in the last 20 years and probably even more so in, even since 2020 with Black Lives Matter, with things like Black Panther and, and social media debates and things like that. It's really come to a lot more people's attention, but these issues go back a very long way.

Um, and if you actually, if you go back to history, you often see people even a hundred years ago, talking about some of the problems with representation or with the way that some objects were acquired, for example. I'd say certainly issues around repatriation, for example, have become a lot more prominent in the last 20 years or so.

[00:04:00] **Tamsin:** So is it more to do with the object ownership or is there more to do with the backstory and where that should really be presented? from the angle of it. What's the main issues here?

[00:04:10] **Rachel Smith:** Yeah, in a way, both those are really big issues. And some people emphasise the ownership of objects and, and argue that a lot of these objects should be returned to their home countries or their home communities from where they were taken or collected.

Um, other people emphasise the ways that museums can use displays and exhibitions to tell colonial histories or to give voice to people who may be being excluded from the museum, tell different stories from diverse communities, uh, within the country as well. So there's lots of different approaches you can take.

[00:04:45] **Swathi:** I was really thinking that decolonising sounds like a bold move because that's owning up and trying to do right by it, that's what comes to me.

[00:04:55] **Tamsin:** Yeah, it's nice to think that things are going home, isn't it? And that it's quite a sweet way for them to be put back to where they're from. Well, Rachel also explains why this is so important and why it matters.

[00:05:06] **Rachel Smith:** Again, there's many answers to that question. And often it really, really matters to the people from whom that item originated or was taken. So, of course, if it's your grandfather's skull that was taken, that's really, really important issue for you. And there's been a lot of drive among indigenous peoples, for example, to try and find out about where their remains of their ancestors might be.

And there's been a lot of efforts to try and, you know, give those remains proper respect and reburial. So there's been lots of cases recently of museums returning ancestral remains to their communities and descendant. Um, but that's not always easy. Sometimes part of the colonial thing was not to identify.

They were treating these, uh, ancestors as objects and not personalising them. So it's not such an easy process always. Other objects are of great cultural importance, perhaps religious, spiritual importance. Some are examples of, um, skills and knowledge that these communities had that sometimes they might feel they've lost and that they can use for cultural revitalisation to start recovering their traditions and their skills, using these as to teach their young people about doing different kinds of crafts, for example.

Other objects can just tell these really important historical stories and, and could be used in exhibitions and displays, perhaps in their countries of origin as well, to tell these stories and make people aware of these, um, histories as well.

[00:06:49] **Tamsin:** So when you're speaking to students about this, what sort of practicalities are involved?

What's the action part of this?

[00:06:55] **Rachel Smith:** So, certainly when I'm teaching museum studies, students, we try and balance some of the theory and there's lots and lots of big debates about some of these big ideas we've talked about and what language to use and what the best ways to talk about these histories are. But we also try and look at the practical things that museums are doing and that can be a wide range of things from putting on exhibitions that highlight different histories, repatriating and restituting things to their communities and their countries. It could be working with different groups, for example, groups of refugees as a way of both helping them kind of form a collective themselves, speak of their own history, giving them a presence in the museum and, and making them feel included in the community as well.

So there's lots and lots of different things we do. And we try and cover that when we're teaching, using examples of different things that different museums have done. Uh, we invite people who work in museums to come and speak about what, what they've been involved in. We give students tasks, for example, like having a go at writing a label for an object that could tell a history in a very understandable way and a succinct way, which is often a very challenging thing to do as well.

[00:08:15] **Swathi:** It's, it's great to hear Museum Studies students are being involved in these important discussions and can hear about what other institutions are doing as well.

[00:08:23] **Tamsin:** Yeah, Rachel talked about how students can engage critically with history through thinking about museums and what they show as well as what they don't show.

[00:08:30] **Rachel Smith:** You hear sometimes a lot in the more conservative media about, are we rewriting history, but if, you know, if we encourage young people and students to think about what that means, who wrote the history in the first place and whose perspective was that representing, was very often a kind of very colonial worldview that not only I think doesn't represent the global majority, um, but also doesn't represent often the views of young people in the UK today as well and so I think it's really important to represent these histories. And it's actually about highlighting, you know, making people think about whose history are we representing, um, lots of people involved in, um, the work

around decolonising want to highlight that museums are not neutral spaces, that you know, whatever story they choose to tell, whatever history they tell, is always coming from a particular position and a particular perspective. And in a way, if they can highlight that, that gives us a much more nuanced picture.

[00:09:39] **Tamsin:** Playing Devil's Advocate, would it be a valid point to say that at some point you're just giving everything back to where it came from? Is there then going to be not the same? multicultural aspects to our own museums, if we're passing all this back to places, or is this encouraging the sharing of information? How would you frame that?

[00:10:00] **Rachel:** Some people do say, "well, what if we give everything back?" And of course, you know, actually in reality, the, the, the amount of things that have gone back or that have been asked to go back is a very small amount of, um, what's in the collections. So I don't think it's ever going to be the case that museums would return everything or that the communities from where they originated would want everything back.

They often are focused on particular objects that are particularly important. When we're talking about decolonising museums, we shouldn't just be talking about repatriation or restitution of objects, the returning of objects. That's one very important part, but it's also about what museums can do, how they can represent different histories, how they can give voice to different people and not only address these colonial histories that they have, but maybe even act as a force for good. More and more museums are saying we want to be an anti racist museum. We want to promote anti racism, not just address our histories of racism, for example.

[00:11:14] **Tamsin:** So in terms of how this is taught as a subject, what do your students actually go through? What do they do?

[00:11:20] **Rachel:** Sure. So for example, in our second year Anthropology course, um, we've got a series of four lectures that are focused particularly on, um, on the question of museums, um, colonialism and decolonising museums.

So yeah, precisely that one of the lectures uses the example of Aberdeen as well as museums in Liverpool, for example, to show how museum displays changed over time and how they perpetuated, uh, historically perpetuated racist ideas, for example. But we also look at histories of collecting. How did these objects come to be in the museums in the first place and all the different colonial activities, um, that were involved in bringing these objects, um, into museums.

But we also look at case studies of the ways that museums have worked with indigenous communities, um, on different projects, sometimes cultural revitalisation projects where, um, communities can access these objects and use them to, um, to perhaps restart crafts and, and, and different traditional knowledge, reactivate some of those in their communities.

We talk about repatriation and restitution of objects as well. So we talk not only about the colonial histories of museums, but what contemporary museums are doing, how they're engaging with different communities as well.

It's a time of big change for museums as well and we try and reflect that in our teaching as well. Um, not only in talking and highlighting a lot of the issues that contemporary museums are facing around issues of decolonisation, but also a lot of the widely varied and very exciting and interesting activities that are happening.

Lots of different museums are implementing at the moment, including our own museum collections here at Aberdeen, there's been some really exciting exhibitions, for example, one on the history of slavery, um, enslavement through the collections. There's been some really interesting efforts here at the museum as well.

So when we teach, we try and allow the students to come up with different ideas as well. Our master's level, they've been involved in putting on exhibitions, making podcasts, and a whole variety of putting these ideas into practice as well. Is it

[00:13:48] **Tamsin:** decolonised state or is this something that could go on forever?

[00:13:51] **Rachel:** I think, um, that's one of the big issues around this, this word decolonising, which has become such a buzzword that actually a lot of people who are doing a lot of the work around tackling these issues in museums are quite critical of the ways that the word decolonisation has sometimes been taken up as if it's just a box that you can tick.

I think we need to acknowledge that museums are completely entangled with these colonial histories and they'll probably never completely decolonise. It's not something you can just, you know, tick off a box or complete. That is this ongoing work, uh, that needs to be done. And there's always more that you can do and more perspectives that you can bring in, um, and different stories that you can tell. And that's one of the exciting things about it as well.

[00:14:41] **Tamsin:** I love that a lot of it is telling the story of the objects and finding out their history and really making it more authentic.

[00:14:47] **Swathi:** And sometimes it's about deliberately starting to tell the stories that haven't been told in the past.

So Tamsin, who are we hearing from next?

[00:15:00] **Tamsin:** That would be Neil Curtis.

[00:15:01] **Neil Curtis:** I'm Head of Museums and Special Collections at the University of Aberdeen.

[00:15:04] **Tamsin:** Because while Rachel talks to students about the work of decolonising museums and collections, Neil is actually doing that work here at Aberdeen.

[00:15:12] **Neil Curtis:** The university has amazing collections. I mean, they've been built up over hundreds of years. I mean, it's one of the things, being an ancient institution, the university talks about being founded in 1495. Throughout that history, the university has been acquiring things. So, we've got archives, we've got books, we've got, you know, prints and material.

But we, we don't have, in some ways, the museum you might expect. Instead, what we have is in the Duncan Rice Library, we've got an exhibition gallery where we keep changing the exhibition. So, in a way, you only see a fraction of the collection that there is. And this is one of the things that, you know, can make what we do in Aberdeen really interesting because we're always having to be in the present and we're not in a way hampered by the old displays that we wish we didn't have that some other museums do.

[00:15:56] **Tamsin:** So you said the University of Aberdeen has acquired some of these things. What does that entail?

[00:16:01] **Neil Curtis:** I use that word very, very carefully and intentionally. Um, there are so many stories and actually, frustratingly, most of them we don't know. I mean, this is one of the really difficult things is there's so little that we know.

The people who collected things in the 19th century often didn't note down much at all. They didn't really say where they got things from, who they got them from, how did they get them. So there's a lot of work still to be done to

find out more, but sometimes we'll never know. But we do know that sometimes people were collecting for, you know, they were gathering scientific specimens.

Sometimes they were getting them as almost diplomatic gifts that people, indigenous people, sometimes very actively gave things to European people to build relationships and increase their status. Other times, things were brutally stolen and seized. I mean, the most famous example is the looting of Benin City in Nigeria.

And that led to things coming into museums. So, that word 'acquired' covers a wide variety of things from, you know, really genuine, well meant, you know, consensual things to really dreadful practices.

I am a middle aged white man and that is who my predecessors were and so the stories that have been told are those. Now I remember one of the early things I noticed in the museum is a really interesting collection of textiles from Albania and they've been really badly catalogued because they were 'women's stuff' and so they were just recorded as 'a collection of textiles'.

So the lack of knowledge because we've had people from a very narrow band of society So one of the biggest challenges for us now is trying to get a wider range of people involved. Now, that can include trying to change it so that this string of white men who are curators, that hopefully will change, but we can also change it just through the people who we work with now.

So including students, trying to get students voices into the interpretation, telling different stories. Sometimes when people say, oh, you're rewriting history and so on, actually what we're doing is we're telling the truth. There were lots of stories that were suppressed, that were seen as not being of interest, so we're enriching things, this decolonisation is enriching things for everybody.

[00:18:17] **Tamsin:** It's crazy to me that women's things weren't catalogued in the same way as men's.

[00:18:21] **Swathi:** One thing I really liked is that decolonising museums is about enriching the institutions and about sharing a wider and richer history.

[00:18:30] **Neil Curtis:** I think one of the sad things I've found is that there are certain museums in Western Europe and North America who have stuff from all over the world and so have been able to tell stories about all over the world, whereas if you go to other parts of the world, the museums only have things from their locality.

So I'm actually quite interested in the idea of how can we get Scottish things to other museums in the world so other people have this opportunity for comparing and contrasting and understanding those complexities of global history.

So, what we're trying to do now is to think, right, we don't want to collect much, we've probably got too much already. We've got a million items across the collection, it's a huge amount. But nonetheless, we should be thinking in a targeted way, which bits of the collection should we be strengthening? So we've got a new collection development policy we're talking about just now and trying to think, um, what should we be collecting that will challenge the existing one, will enrich it, will make it more truthful?

[00:19:32] **Tamsin:** So from Neil's perspective, we have an opportunity to tell histories in exciting new ways.

[00:19:37] **Swathi:** I'm loving his and Rachel's enthusiasm.

[00:19:40] **Neil Curtis:** We're now able to properly engage and not just passively, not just put things in glass cases and expect people to come. Really work with people both locally and around the world, a wider variety of people to tell, much more interesting, much more truthful, much more challenging stories, and also to develop our collections so they are more representative and better able to tell those stories and work with people. I mean, if museums are worth having, it's what they do with people that matters. And so, you know, I regard decolonisation just as part of that. I mean, there are many other aspects of inequality. Uh, I mean, I've hinted already about the problems we have with gender, age, sexuality, being really poorly represented in the collections.

So there's many other aspects of life which, um, thinking about decolonisation takes us into a much richer and more honest way of approaching what we do.

[00:20:30] **Tamsin:** So you're sat on the edge of a cultural and ethical kind of war at the end of the day. So how do students get into this? What's their route in?

[00:20:39] **Neil Curtis:** I think there's so many different ways. I mean, clearly anthropology is an important way and there's courses at undergraduate that are dealing with decolonisation, but also in languages, literature in history, and you know, even I mean, I teach it in medicine and law. So it's a huge range of subjects that are addressing decolonisation and thinking about the place of museums.

We also have a postgraduate in Museum Studies. So, but I'd also highlight that students can take part without doing a subject. You can come and visit the museum exhibitions. You can become a volunteer. I think it's one of the things about being in the University of Aberdeen, in a way most universities can't do this, that we've got this central sense of the collections in our history and challenging that and really across a wide variety of disciplines, we're thinking this. So I think it's an incredibly important selling point for the University of Aberdeen, that this is an area you can get involved in lots of different ways that suit different people.

[00:21:36] **Tamsin:** From an Aberdeen perspective, is repatriation an aspect of your role?

[00:21:40] **Neil Curtis:** Oh, definitely. I mean, it's actually something that, you know, we've been doing in Aberdeen for quite a while. I think the first case I was involved in was back 2002, 2003. But we've had a number of different examples. I mean, the one in back in 2003 was a Native American sacred bundle that was returned, you know, it was a sacred item to them.

To people in Aberdeen, it was just an item of stuff from North America. There was really very little understanding of how important it was to them. Um, we've also returned ancestors to Maori and also Tasmania, and that's recognising that what historically were treated as an explicitly racial specimens are actually people's ancestors.

And in some cultures, many cultures, ancestors are really important. And so it's so wrong for them to be in a museum collection as a specimen. The most famous example most recently was just, you know, a couple of years ago when we actually were the first museum in the world to return a Benin bronze. And these have been some of the most high profile examples of imperial loot.

And there's been a lot of discussion over the years about whether these should be loaned or kept in some of the big museums of the world and so on. And it turned out there was one in Aberdeen that had been bought by the University in 1957, quite legitimately. But when we looked into it, I said, Quite clearly, this had been looted in the destruction of Benin City.

And so the challenge then was to work out who do you return this to? And so we had quite a while finding the right people. And in the end, we were able to have a ceremonial handover in Aberdeen where it was given to a combination of representatives of the federal government of Nigeria and their national museums and traditional king, the Oba of Benin.

That was fascinating being involved with. It was really good feeling that we contributed something and it did something to that widespread debate. And I think that has helped move a lot of museums on and thinking. I think being part of the university really helps because we're always trying to think and challenge ourselves on what we're doing and think, "how can this benefit society around the world?"

So, you know, the other ones we're discussing just, just now, you know, this is something that is now becoming a normal part of museum work. It is really complicated. It can be really quite emotionally taxing, but it is really important.

[00:24:10] **Swathi:** Wow, I, I want to know more about this Benin bronze.

[00:24:14] **Tamsin:** Well, it was a statue of the head and shoulders, called a bust, of a king in the West African kingdom of Benin, now part of modern day Nigeria.

[00:24:22] **Neil Curtis:** So it was a life size head, cast in bronze, um, showing him wearing his regalia of, um, coral beads, uh, and so on. Quite a heavy item. There are many other Benin bronzes. Some of them are portrait busts. Some of them are plaques recording historical incidents. Some of them images of animals such as birds.

Um, the one, that was the one that we had in Aberdeen. There's a wider variety around the world. To the people of Benin City, these were, you know, the records of their history. You know, they were incredibly important. They came onto the art market and became examples of, quote, "primitive art". But in Benin, they were, you know, the royal treasures.

the historic record of the kingdom.

I could almost guarantee that if you come to Aberdeen as a student, at some time while you're a student, something will be repatriated. And that's something that we're able to do is work with students through the, you know, they can find out what is happening as it's happening. There was a particularly fortunate, you know, couple of classes who just before the ceremony returned the Benin bronze, I was able to take this Benin bronze into a lecture theatre and talk about it in their class. Now, I can't promise that for everybody else, but that's the sort of thing that we're able to do. These are the live, practical issues that are happening, feed directly into teaching.

Thanks to Dr Rachel Smith and Neil Curtis for sharing the exciting work

[00:25:56] **Swathi:** that they're involved in.

[00:25:58] **Tamsin:** If you want to join the Boundary Breakers, come to one of Aberdeen's open days and see our historic campus. You can download our digital prospectus at www.abdn.ac.uk

[00:26:13] **Swathi:** And check out the rest of the series. In each episode, we meet the people and teams behind the groundbreaking research going on at the University of Aberdeen.

Bye for now.

[00:26:23] **Tamsin:** See you next time.