

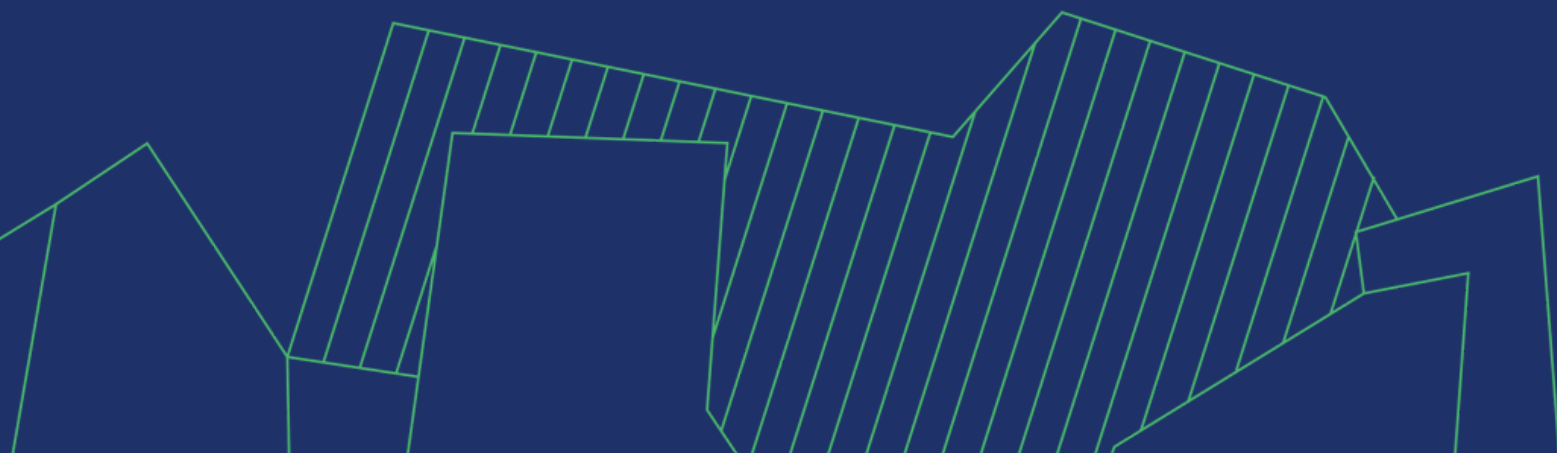


Colonial Collections
Consortium

Report

European Working Conference on Collections from Colonial Contexts

Colonial Collections Consortium
23-25 September 2025



Content

Summary	2
Introduction	4
Participants	4
Programme	4
Sessions	6
Session 1: Becoming transparent, doing our research	6
Session 2: Methods for return, procedures and logistics.....	6
Session 3: Caring for Objects	7
Session 4: Shaping Collaboration	8
Posters	9
Outcomes and reflections	11
Next steps	12

Summary

Between 23-25 September 2025, approximately eighty participants gathered in the Netherlands for the European Working Conference on Collections from Colonial Contexts, organized by the Colonial Collections Consortium. This conference aimed at bringing together museum professionals working with objects and collections originating from colonial contexts to share experiences and exchange practical knowledge. The event intended to foster ongoing dialogue, and to help build a sustainable network of professionals committed to transparent, responsible stewardship.

The programme ran for three days, hosted at the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands in Amersfoort and the Wereldmuseum in Leiden. The programme consisted of sixteen speakers who each presented a case study from a European context. The sessions were centred around the key themes of the conference:

1. Becoming transparent, doing our research
2. Methods for return, procedures and logistics
3. Caring for objects
4. Shaping collaboration

Additionally, the programme included poster presentations.

The main points that emerged during the conference highlighted the importance of (1) accountability in working towards undoing of historical injustice, of (2) collaboration with communities of origin to make restitution into a meaningful practice that is guided by communities of origin and has the potential to establish long-term partnerships between institutions and communities, and of (3) institutions giving the reins to communities of origin in collaborative processes, allowing communities to set the agenda and reappropriate collections through their own narratives. Reflecting on these takeaways, it becomes clear that meaningful collaboration requires openness, transparency and accountability from European institutions, in order to not reproduce relationships of the colonial past. Putting meaningful collaboration into practice was a continuous thread throughout the conference. Based on the outcomes of the conference and the next steps suggested by the participants, the Consortium intends to take several steps to initiate our shared responsibility of maintaining the networks and continuing the conversations and dialogues held during the conference. These steps include offering a platform that participants can actively participate in to share updates on their projects related to the careful handling of collections from a colonial context and offering a space for thematic expert meetings on important topics and issues that emerged. Museum professionals working with collections from a colonial context are invited to think along with these initiatives and give their input. The Consortium intends to share more about these next steps in the beginning of 2026.

The Consortium looks back on a conference that was successful in bringing together museum professionals working in Europe to exchange experiences and dilemmas relating to handling collections from a colonial context and building a network for those working with these collections. At the same time, we recognize that this conference had limitations, including the decision to only invite museum professionals working in Europe, which meant that the voices of communities of origin largely remained absent. Looking back on this conference, it is thus important to note that the takeaways have emerged within conversations between museum professionals working in Europe. We look forward

to continuing the dialogue and expanding the network beyond museum professionals in Europe.

Introduction

Between 23-25 September 2025, the Colonial Collections Consortium invited museum and collection professionals from across Europe to participate in The European Working Conference on Collections from Colonial Contexts. This conference aimed at bringing together museum professionals working with objects and collections originating from colonial contexts to share experiences and exchange practical knowledge. The event intended to foster ongoing dialogue and collaboration, and to contribute to a sustainable network of professionals committed to transparent, responsible stewardship. The conference audience consisted of approximately eighty participants, with sixteen speakers presenting across the four themes of the conference.

The conference was organized by the Colonial Collections Consortium, a partnership between five organisations in the Netherlands: Museum Bronbeek, the NIOD Institute for War-, Holocaust- and Genocide studies, the Cultural Heritage Agency, the Rijksmuseum and the Wereldmuseum. The Consortium supports institutions administering collections in provenance research by sharing knowledge, answering questions and providing stakeholders with a network. More information about the consortium is available [here](#).

Participants

The conference was specifically focused on welcoming professionals from European museum and institutions managing collections, including curators, registrars, conservators, collection managers, and depot staff – anyone involved in managing collections from colonial contexts. An important point raised by many of the participants in the conference was that the organization decided to only invite museum professionals working in museums in Europe, meaning that representatives of communities of origin were largely absent from this conference.

The choice of the organization to only invite museum professionals working in European institutions, was addressed by Wayne Modest, Director of Content at the Wereldmuseum, during his opening words on the second day of the conference. Wayne reflected on the urgent responsibilities of European institutions and museum professionals to ensure a better future. He emphasized that in redressing historical injustices stemming from colonialism, the burden of undoing should not rest on the formerly colonized, but on the former colonizer. It is European museums that must take responsibility and do the work.

This conference aimed at instigating a network of European institutions and museum professionals to facilitate them in doing the work of undoing. This principle was a guiding thread throughout the three-day conference.

Programme

The conference spanned three days. The first day was hosted at the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands in Amersfoort, the second day at the Wereldmuseum in Leiden. The first two days consisted of sessions focused on the four key themes of the conference:

1. Becoming transparent, doing our research
2. Methods for return, procedures and logistics
3. Caring for objects
4. Shaping collaboration

During each session, three relevant case studies pertaining to the theme of the session were presented. Each theme was introduced or reflected upon by an expert, who addressed the relevance of the theme for working with collections from a colonial context. After all case studies were presented, the participants were brought into conversation with the speakers during a Q&A. The content of the sessions will be reflected upon in more detail further on in this report. In the afternoon of the first two days, there was time for the participants to get to know each other during networking rounds: poster presentations and speed dates. On the third day, the participants had the opportunity to visit the Consortium partners with field trips to Museum Bronbeek, CollectieCentrum Nederland, Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, Rijksmuseum and the Wereldmuseum depot in 'S Gravenzande.

Sessions

Session 1: Becoming transparent, doing our research

After a word of welcome by Arjan de Zeeuw, Knowledge & Advice Director at the Cultural Heritage Agency, and opening words by moderators Bente Bergmans and Remco Vermeulen, the conference commenced with the first theme: 'Becoming transparent, doing our research.' This session highlighted several initiatives on making collections from a colonial context available and accessible and therefore working towards transparency.

Firstly, Maria Camilla De Palma (Castello D'Albertis Museum of World Cultures in Genoa) presented on her experiences and dilemmas in making colonial history of collections visible in the museum. She explained how, in her institution, they work towards transparency by collaborating with communities of origin and diaspora to re-interpret the collection and facilitate online access to archival records to encourage this collaboration. Secondly, Camiel de Kom (Cultural Heritage Agency) presented on the Colonial Collections Datahub, a project of the Colonial Collections Consortium. He shared more about the platform's functionalities, but also the considerations behind it and how they approached questions such as, who has ownership or authority over the data on the platform? Ending his presentation, Camiel expressed the wish to explore possibilities for European collaboration on the Datahub as a way for European institutions to take the responsibility to make their collections transparent and accessible. Thirdly, Imogen Coulson (Digital Benin) presented on the Digital Benin platform, which brings together all materials looted from Benin Kingdom. Imogen highlighted the platform's ability to bring together objects previously difficult to locate due to different vocabulary use in institutions outside of Nigeria. Both Digital Benin and the Colonial Collections Datahub show that digital tools are instrumental for transparency, visibility and accessibility; to bring together collections and recognize patterns; and to foster existing knowledge and narratives.

In closing this session, Ananda Rutherford (Museum Collections Specialist and Researcher) reflected on the meaning of transparency, stating that it goes beyond accessibility and availability. Instead, she called for a shift "from transparency to accountability", urging initiatives such as the one presented in this session to be based on an openness for a fundamental change of what museum professionals do, to work towards genuinely inclusive spaces.¹ This was further discussed in the Q&A, during which the audience underscored the importance of digital tools for locating objects, but stated that the focus should be on small projects instead of larger projects that simply offer up data to make it available under the guise of transparency. In conclusion, this session established the importance of accessibility in working towards transparency, but urged participants to think beyond accessibility, reflecting on what happens in these digital spaces and how to collaborate with communities of origin to make transparency meaningful. Finally, in stating that restitution should be considered the most fundamental action of accountability, Ananda effectively connected this first session to the session that followed.

Session 2: Methods for return, procedures and logistics

¹ Ananda Rutherford's reflections and the edited text of her talk are available on her website: [Collections from Colonial Contexts – Museum:Data:Laundry](#)

The discussion on restitution continued with the theme 'Methods for return, procedures and logistics.' During this session, several case studies were presented by museum professionals who have experience with the practicalities of restitution, logistic complexities and different forms of return. Introducing this theme, Amy Shakespeare (International Repatriation Specialist) stated that restitution has become an increasingly institutionalized process that is not guided by the needs and desires of communities of origin. The urgency of collaborating with communities of origin then became a leading thread throughout this session.

Firstly, Wendy Boham (Wereldmuseum) elaborated on how the Wereldmuseum collaborates with communities of origin in the restitution process, making it clear that collaboration is essential in establishing practical matters of return, for example to consider the spiritual value of an object in determining the practicalities of a return. Secondly, Raphael Schwere (Natural History Museum Basel), Pamela González Alvarez and Evelyn Silva Cabrera (Pueblo Kawésqar Foundation) shared their experience collaborating to repatriate ancestral remains to the Kawésqar community in Chile. While Pamela and Evelyn addressed the importance of repatriating ancestral remains to address and heal the colonial trauma that persists in their community,² Raphael elaborated on the process of establishing the Basel 2025 restitution protocol, serving as the practical guidelines for this restitution. Thirdly, Agnus Patterson (Victoria and Albert Museum) shared his experience working together with the Manhyia Palace Museum in Kumasi, Ghana to establish a long-term loan agreement of seventeen pieces of Asante Gold from the collection of the V&A. In this process, the focus lay heavily on creating an ongoing partnership between the institutions, moving beyond the administrative process of a usual loan.

Departing from the statement made by Amy Shakespeare, the presentations in this session showed how collaboration with communities of origin allowed restitution to move beyond a mere administrative process. Collaboration allows institutions to be guided by the wishes of communities and has the potential for establishing long-term partnerships. The discussion in the Q&A, furthermore, determined that within this collaboration, exclusionary practices, such as the use of English as a leading language, should be acknowledged and considered by the organization in order to make dialogues accessible for everyone, including non-English speakers. Additionally, the discussion put forward proactiveness as a crucial part of the restitution process, specifically when it comes to creating social and political awareness.

Session 3: Caring for Objects

The second day of the conference (24 September) took place at the Wereldmuseum in Leiden. After opening words by Wayne Modest, who reflected on the urgent responsibilities of European institutions and museum professionals to ensure a better future, we started the day with the third key theme of the conference: Caring for objects. The theme was introduced by Cindy Zalm (Wereldmuseum), who addressed the processes that objects undergo as they become part of museum collections and catalogues, stating that objects go through transformative processes as they enter and evolve in the museum. The case studies presented in this session further showed that different objects demand different forms of care, highlighting the tension between institutional standards and community perspectives.

² The translation of their written speeches, spoken in Spanish during the conference, are available [here](#).

Firstly, Jan Hüsken (German Lost Art Foundation) offered an overview of the current state of provenance research on human remains in Germany. Stating that human remains pose one of the most pressing issues in provenance research of collections from a colonial context, Jan encouraged a shift from caring for objects to caring for people. Caring for people became a prominent theme throughout the rest of this session, not only when it came to human remains in museum collections, but also in fostering the safety of museum staff handling certain objects and of communities of origin welcoming these back. This became apparent in the presentation by Eline Van Heymbeeck and Naomi Meulemans (Royal Museum for Central Africa), as they spoke on the toxic substances released by objects that were treated with pesticides as a conservation strategy. Because of their treatment, these objects pose a danger to both museum staff and, in the case of restitution, to the community of origin. Eline and Naomi emphasized that in their work, collaboration is crucial to navigate between cultural respect, institutional integrity and scientific research. Lastly, Laura van Broekhoven (Pitt Rivers Museum) presented on the indigenous-led collaboration that the Pitt Rivers Museum engages in. She explained that, in putting healing at the heart of museum work, the institution works towards a new museum ethics that forefronts caring for objects from a cultural approach, rather than from a preservation approach. She clarified that while objects often spark the conversation with communities of origin, repatriation is not always the outcome. Instead, the focus is on building meaningful relations and regenerative partnerships in which the museum is one of the partners working towards redressing historical injustice.

The case studies presented in this session reached back to the discussions held on day one, where we emphasized the importance of collaborating with communities of origin and the importance of proactiveness. During the Q&A, we further discussed the importance of collaboration in caring for objects. It was noted that being open to listening and to being challenged is important, as well as time and patience to build trust and longstanding networks. It became clear that doing the work means putting the wishes of communities of origin at the forefront. This point was further emphasized in the session that followed.

Session 4: Shaping Collaboration

The fourth and last theme of the conference 'Shaping collaboration' was introduced by Klaas Stutje (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies). In his introduction, Klaas delved into the etymology of collaboration and traced the history of the collaborative process. In doing so, he emphasized that while collaboration is important, communities and countries of origin should also be given space to create the agenda.

Giving communities of origin space to create their own narrative and tell their own stories became a leading thread throughout this session. In the first case study, Heba Abd el-Gawad (Horniman Museum and Gardens) reflected on the process of collaborative curation as a practice of decolonization. Presenting on the exhibition *All Eyes on Her!*, Heba showed the importance of refusing traditional museum practices, to give collaborative curation the power to reshape Eurocentric narratives presented in the museum.³ During the second presentation of this session, Samuel Bachmann (Bern

³ More information about the exhibition can be found through the following sources:

- Project webpage: [All Eyes On Her! - Horniman Museum and Gardens](#)
- Article: [All eyes on her! Dismantling 'Egypt' in UK museums | Art UK](#)
- Article: [View of Strategic Narcissism: A Lived Experience of 'Decolonising', Inclusion of and 'Collaborations'](#)

History Museum) presented on a collaborative research project concerning an ethnographic collections appropriated in a violent colonial context, between the Bern History Museum and a descendant community in Namibia. An interesting outcome of the project was the renaming of the collection, which changed from being named after its collectors to 'The Usakos Railway Workers' Collection', representing its connection to the community. In the final presentation of the conference, Taina Máret Pieski (Sámi Museum Siida) presented on the collaborative processes behind the main exhibition *These lands are our children*. By creating this exhibition in collaboration with the Sámi community and recognizing Sámi traditional knowledge as equal to western science, the museum places the narrative of the community at the forefront.

The case studies presented in this session underscored the importance of collaboration between institutions and communities. Building on the discussion that followed session 3 earlier that day, the audience and speakers once more emphasized the importance of giving the power to make the agenda to communities of origin. Institutions, on the other hand, were encouraged to give space to communities and search for what is possible within political constraints, instead of using them as an excuse not to do the work.

Posters

In addition to the case studies presented during the sessions, the conference included several poster presentations. These were displayed on both days and locations of the conference. The wide range of (research) projects presented on these posters gave additional insights into how different institutions and different museum professionals in Europe ensure a careful handling with collections from a colonial context. You will find a list of the presenting organisations with their topics below. All the posters will be published on the Colonial Collections Consortium website.

- Confrontar o legado colonial no Museu/Facing colonial legacy in the Museum – Museu Municipal Santos Rocha Figueira da Foz
- *Ancestral remains* from colonial contexts in the Van der Hoeven skull collection in Germany – University of Leipzig, Faculty of Medicine and German Lost Art Foundation, presented by Dr. Ulrike Löttsch and Isabelle Reimann
- UNESCO Chair on Museum Collections, Repatriation and Interculturality – Reinwardt Academy, presented by Dr. Csilla Ariese
- Duplicates in Museums: Becoming transparent about past curatorial practices – University of Brighton and British Museum, presented by Anna Nielsen
- Provenance & Linked Open Data: Two international initiatives – Naturalis Biodiversity Center, presented by Roxali Bijmoer and Annika Hendriksen
- Incorporating decolonization in the daily work of the collection manager – Naturalis Biodiversity Center, presented by Natasja den Ouden
- Digital Research Aids – NIOD, Institute for War-, Holocaust- and Genocide Studies and Colonial Collections Consortium, presented by Wiebe Reints and Maarten van der Bent
- Screening the Collection: Provenance Research at the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) – Museum der Kulturen Basel, presented by Basil Bucher

[with Indigenous Researchers](#)

- Short film: <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/about-the-art-bikeee-by-hadeer-khalil/>

- Podcast: [Only Collections in the Building Podcast series | UCL Egypt at the Horniman Museum](#)

- Sensitive Photography? Colonial Photo Collections at the Museum der Kulturen Basel – Museum der Kulturen Basel, presented by Aila Özvegyi
- *(Tr)African(t)s*. Museums and Collections of Catalonia in the Face of Coloniality – University of Barcelona

Outcomes and reflections

The different case studies from various parts of Europe that were presented during this conference make it clear that European institutions are all dealing with similar dilemmas, problems and issues in figuring out how to proceed with and handle objects collected from a colonial context. At the same time, this conference provided the opportunity to share experiences and inspiring stories of collaboration that make working with these collections a meaningful practice of decolonization. As Laura van Broekhoven said during the Q&A of session 3, for many museum professionals, contributing to a meaningful future for objects that became part of collections through violence and historical injustice, is what their work is all about. This conference exemplified this, as European museum professionals gathered, connected and shared their passion and drive to contribute to and ensure a better future for collections from a colonial context.

A few key takeaways from the conference:

- Accessibility of collections is important in working towards transparency, but more important in working towards undoing historical injustices is accountability and making every initiative of transparency mark a fundamental change of what museum professionals do.
- Without collaboration with communities of origin, restitution becomes an administrative practice. Restitution should be guided by communities of origin, giving it the potential to establish long-term partnerships between institutions and communities.
- In collaborative processes, the reins should be given to communities of origin. Institutions are accountable for being proactive in giving space to communities to set the agenda and reappropriate collections through their own narratives.
- While emphasis was placed on collaboration between European institutions and communities of origin during many of the case study presentations and the discussions, organisers and participants were part of a conference where these communities were largely absent. Many participants pointed out that this posed problems and was not in line with what they aim to contribute to in their work.

Reflecting on these takeaways, it becomes clear that meaningful collaboration was a continuing thread throughout this conference. Collaboration both with communities of origin, as well as between institutions managing collections from a colonial context and museum professionals working with these collections. At the same time, the decision to only invite museum professionals working in Europe made that the voices of communities of origin largely remained absent and there was no opportunity to put collaboration into practice. It is thus important to note that the takeaways have emerged within conversations between museum professionals working in Europe.

The goal for this European Working Conference was to bring together museum professionals throughout Europe to exchange experiences and dilemmas relating to handling collections from a colonial context and contribute to a network with those working with these collections. In this sense, the Consortium looks back on a successful conference and looks forward to the continuation of conversations and discussions with those who attended the conference. Yet, we recognize that only inviting museum professionals working in Europe poses a limitation and we look forward to expanding the network of professionals working with collections from a colonial context beyond those working in Europe.

Next steps

In the beginning of 2026, the Consortium Colonial Collections would like to continue the conversation with museum professionals and experts who did and did not join the conference, in order to learn about their ideas, wishes and desires for networking and exchanging, and the possibilities for them to contribute to that. As a guideline, the intended follow ups are based on the continuing of the conversation and the maintaining and expanding of the network.

Museum professionals working with collections from a colonial context are invited to think along and contribute to initiatives emerging from the European Working Conference on Collections from Colonial Contexts. If you would like to share your ideas, you can contact the Consortium at info@colonialcollections.nl. More information about the follow ups will be shared by the Consortium in the beginning of 2026.