The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past			Cambridge Heritage Research Centre
Interview Date:	20-07-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Nick Merriman	Organisation:	Horniman Museum and Gardens
Position:	Director		

Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Nick Merriman, Director of the Horniman Museum and Gardens. 20-07-2020

Tom Crowley 2:11

This is on the on the 20th of July 2020. It's Tom Crowley. I'm conducting interview with Nick Merriman, Director of the Horniman Museum. And yeah, before I start Nick, I'm just going to say that obviously you are speaking in a professional capacity, but we understand some of what you say could be inflected by your personal opinions as well. So, I'll just start with our first question.

Tom Crowley 2:41

Has your museum done anything which engages with the legacy of slavery or colonialism in recent years? And that's prior to the current Black Lives Matter debate.

Nick Merriman 2:54

Well, yes. In the sense that the Horniman's anthropologists have for a long time been involved in post-colonial debates. Gosh, you know, probably about 25 years ago, perhaps a little less than that. The African Worlds gallery which Tony Shelton curated was about the African diaspora and I mean it's gone now, but it certainly did engage with some with those, those debates and the anthropologist's practice, of course, like other anthropologists in museums and elsewhere has been fundamentally shaped by ideas about dealing with the legacy of slave trade and an empire.

More recently, though, the replacement of that African Worlds gallery, the World Gallery, to show a sample of all of the Horniman's collections across the inhabited continents. [It] was only opened two years ago. And interestingly with two years' perspective actually there were omissions. But it was imbued with a kind of a humanistic anthropology I suppose, most explicitly in relation to Empire. It has a case on the Benin material, bronzes, etc, which does acknowledge the fact that they were looted and acknowledges the participation of colleagues from Nigeria, in the display, etc. But apart from that general kind of museological work, I'm not aware, I've only been director for just over two years. So, I'm not aware of the detail of everything. But one of the things I was very anxious to do, arriving two years ago in May 2018, was to address some of the colonial legacy issues because the Horniman is largely a colonial museum and some of the collections are post-colonial, but the larger the core of it, and the impetus and the founding context was definitely Imperial.

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And that legacy, of course, imbues everything to do with London today. So one of the things I was very aware of when I came to the Horniman was that it hadn't really explicitly enough confronted its colonial legacy in its collections, interpretation, etc. and its programming. And it was not very diverse in terms of its audiences, particularly, its black audiences were very underrepresented. So, we developed a couple of things. One was a project called rethinking relationships and building trust around African collections, which was done in partnership with the Pitt Rivers, and the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and World Museum, Liverpool, to look to try and work with colleagues in African museums and heritage organisations, and crucially, the diaspora communities in the UK on what the future of these African collections might be. So not immediately from a repatriation lens, but saying, let's think about relationships. And let's think about building trust when perhaps doesn't really exist, which would make the question of location of collections perhaps slightly easier to, to address. So that's ongoing at the moment. And we also embarked on a whole series of other things which, I mean, whether they're really immediately to do with slavery and the colonial legacy is up to you, but on trying to widen engagement amongst Black audiences, we're doing and you know, Tom, we've got very good musical instrument collections. They're quite polite, and the audiences are quite polite. We're doing a project on grime to introduce new audiences and musicians locally. So, it's trying to really move the organisation into a moment where it lives with its history. More, more transparently.

Tom Crowley 7:40

Thank you. Um, so the next question is: how has Black Lives Matter influenced policy going formward?

Nick Merriman 8:03

Yes, we were well, in a way, the protests around the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent reactions around the world were something that we, I suppose like, like so many cultural organisations had absolute empathy with and wanted to do something about. But I was very keen that after the sort of statements that people were — felt right to make that we backed that up with action.

So, we did a couple of immediate things which are not particularly, you know, surprising. And you'll have seen I think that this was given added impetus in the Horniman, because Frederick Horniman was named on the Topple the Racists website as an arch colonialist, exploiter of, I can't remember the exact words, I mean collector of shrunken heads and so on. And so, we were, you know, felt impelled to look, look at that and then address it. So pretty rapidly we did a public statement on our website, about our understanding at that point of the origin of the Horniman family's wealth from the tea trade in Empire and imperial exploitation. And we committed to make another series of shorter-term actions. One is to revise the panels in the Horniman family display in the World Gallery to acknowledge [the tea trade's and therefore the family's

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connection with Empire] and actually there's been some interesting developments between the two. And those will be in place for the reopening [of the Museum] on the 30th of July. And to put a panel in the Benin display about the ongoing project around the African collections, which are incidentally focusing on Kenya and Nigeria in the first place, including Benin therefore.

But longer term in terms of policy and this is something that I'm sort of happy to say publicly. I've been working for over 30 years in museums and my PhD many years ago was all about opening up access to museums for people who didn't feel they were for them. And I'm now fed up that not enough progress has been made. And of course, all of the debates even 30 years ago, around critical histories have really largely failed to have a significant impact on museum interpretation, things like acknowledgement of the legacy of the slave trade and of the British Empire.

So, we've developed what I'm calling a reset action plan for the Horniman, which is about accelerating our work around transparency, of the history of the Horniman family and of the colonial legacy of much of the collections and working on the diversity and accessibility of the Horniman to wider audiences. So, our future agenda is really about transparency and diversity. And this action plan draws together, essentially, seven strands of work, five of which were already underway, - two new ones- into an overall action plan. And the two new ones are initiatives around what I've said already really, acknowledgement of and research into the family history and origin of the wealth and continuing work on the colonial provenance of the collections. And we want to move beyond the two African case studies to you know, South Asia, East Asia, etc. And the other the other thing, not only diversifying audiences, but also looking at ways of diversifying our staff. So it means that our equality and diversity and inclusion plans are central to our agenda, not just something sort of slightly to the side as part of the sort of overall HR approach. So, it's bringing everything into an integrated action plan around accelerating diversity and transparency.

Tom Crowley 13:01

Great, thank you. Um, so I'm going to say the next question. You may feel that you already answered it, but I'm just going through this in a formulaic way. Can you expand on why you made these decisions?

Nick Merriman 13:16

Well, I think if I can add any other colour to it, I suppose the other thing is a kind of looking at Horniman's legacy, because he's been seen particularly in the World Gallery in a very positive light, Quaker background, philanthropic, gave, you know, was an MP, promoting and putting a lot of his own money into social reform. His parents who set up the company were members of the anti-slavery society and Howard League for Penal Reform. So, he's been cast very much as a good, benign, founder, and the founding plaque on the museum is about giving the museum and gardens to the people of London as a free museum. So that's a great thing. The recent critique has caused that to be overlain, overshadowed, perhaps not

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overshadowed but certainly interwoven with this kind of blindness towards the suffering from the, the origin of the tea. And just as an aside, it's quite interesting. I mean, Horniman was born after the effective end of slavery in most of the Empire, and then there were merchants who were really grocers buying their tea on the London market. They didn't have plantations anywhere, and they bought it in China or from China. And that's opened up a whole avenue of research around opium and the East India Company and so on. So that's part of the motivation for this, to actually excavate more stories around the British Empire, which are under explored publicly. I mean, slavery is not acknowledged enough publicly, but it is quite well established, I suppose. And the British Empire clearly is, but some of these stories like the Opium Wars, which were necessary in order that the British could have their well-earned 'cuppa', you know, are really not well known. So, there's that motor and the other motor actually, is to build on some of the positive legacy that Horniman like a lot of these philanthropists, it's a double-edged kind of picture. And I think there was some genuine motivation, you know, Quaker motivated generosity at the heart of this. We have gone to those founding principles, or at least been influenced by Quaker thinking around equity and around social justice. So, we want to sort of take the best of what we interpret as Horniman's legacy as a way of driving forward this agenda around justice and equity in the present.

And finally, part of it is me saying, why do we get public funding for the Horniman? It's so that it is available for all. It would be possible to operate the Horniman as a paid for public attraction with no funding, you know, a sort of amusement park and museum and kind of animal experience. But it would be only accessible to a very restricted audience of the wealthy or relatively well-off middle class. So, my points to my colleagues and there's no dissent about this is that there's a kind of ethical imperative, both from the founding legacy of Horniman. And from our public funding to be accessible to all, and we are currently not achieving that. And that is unacceptable now, which is why we need to accelerate our actions around resolving it.

Tom Crowley 17:32

So has the pulling down of the Colston statute influenced your plans going forward? I think you've answered that, right? You don't want to add anything about Colston in particular coming down?

Nick Merriman 17:55

No, it was clearly a moment. I mean, because Horniman was mentioned on the website [Topple the Racists]. We were obviously— I mean, there's no statute, there's no public statue of Horniman. But there is a plaque, you know, so we thought, well, you know, we need to do something about that— we were tipped off actually by the local council, that there's going to be a protest outside— a few weeks ago, but nothing materialised.

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I mean, my personal view on the Colston thing is that the toppling of Colston was an important symbolic moment, and it was partly symbolic of the lack of progress on acknowledging the legacy of slavery in this case. Overall, though, I would say I'm in favour of the reinterpretation or additional interpretation of monuments rather than their replacement. Which is why, you know, we are changing our interpretation of Horniman rather than trying to remove it, you know, in a way that would be impossible— or rename, there were some calls on local discussion groups to rename the Horniman, well, probably one call that we did look at it and we were asked by journalists, but we said well, actually better to be transparent about our founder and where the funds came from. Acknowledging the good things that have come out of that legacy as well as the tainted origin of the money.

Tom Crowley 19:54

The next question is: "Has the website Topple the Racists influenced your response?" I think we've just been talking about that. So, the next question, I think you may feel you've [also] covered this already. But as I said, I'm going through them [in order]. Do you plan to address the legacies of slavery / colonialism in displays or other public areas in your museum? And [in doing so] what resources do you draw on? And who do you consult?

Nick Merriman 20:33

Well, we are, I mean, as I've described, some of our work at the moment is around the collections themselves, including their ultimate resting place. And so that might not be particularly manifest in the displays. But as I said two years ago, when the World Gallery opened, we had a [text] panel in the display of the Benin material which talked about their looting. We are introducing a new panel, or rather an extension of the existing panel talking about our current project. So, in other words, the panel itself will change as circumstances change. And it will talk in particular about us consulting, as well as working with colleagues in Nigeria in this instance, and talking to members Nigerian diaspora community locally about their opinions about the collection, and its current presence in Horniman. And thoughts about long term options. So that'll be in the public domain. And we are despite working with COVID at the moment— we had planned sort of, you know, face to face workshops and so on with the local community about this. We're having to do it remotely now through a video conference, etc. But that consultation is happening. And this is slightly away from the display bit, but I'll return to that. All of this work on collections will culminate in a report going to our trustees in October, which I anticipate, you know, all the background will be laid out and various options for the future, which will include some options for the Benin material as well. So, we'll see what happens then. And I can't anticipate what those options might be. But there will be some public, we've been very transparent about that. And so, there'll be a lot of public interest. In terms of the displays, apart from the changes in the Horniman family [section of the World Gallery], and the Benin display because the gallery is only two years old. [recording momentarily disrupted]— one of our actions in the strands of work I out outlined. The one about transparency, about collections and the family will include some longer-term proposals for the displays. And how

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we, without having to redo the whole gallery is another cost of 5 million pounds which will not be possible. We might update and it could be some relabelling. It could, for example, be commissioning an artist do an intervention. We don't know where, we're still at the very early stages of that, but there's a commitment to do something about it. And similar, by the way, we're talking about this being a whole organisation thing. And I think this is an important point. This approach is not just focused on our anthropology collections, but also on our music collections and our Natural History Collections, because we're trying to make the most of our unique position as London's only museum where nature and culture can be seen side by side at the global level. So, we do have plans and have had plans for a while to redisplay, the Natural History Gallery, which is about 50 or 60 years old now. Which will include displays about natural history and Empire. Because that's another story that urgently needs telling and overcoming the nature culture divide that has prevented the imperial exploitation of environments from being told in the stories that museums tell. And similarly, one of our music curators is very enthusiastic about looking at ivory, hardwoods, mahoganies and things like that in musical instruments that came from exploiting the resources of the Empire. So, it's quite exciting to be able to think of a whole organisation approach and not one that just focuses on anthropology collections, for example. So, you know, gallery changes can take quite a long time, but we hope to be able to put in something palpable in reasonably short term as well as having a long-term strategy.

Tom Crowley 25:33

So again, this next question, we've covered quite a lot of it, but perhaps there's one or two elements in it that we might expand on a little bit. So, it's the same thing, but we're not talking about galleries anymore, but [changes to] education, the arts, recruitment, in terms of legacies of slavery and colonialism.

Nick Merriman 25:58

Yes, well as I said, we're attempting to take a whole organisation approach on the basis that you must tackle it, root and branch, otherwise you won't be successful. So we feel we have to have a staff and volunteering profile that matches that of, well as close as we can get to the London population, if we are to achieve our aspiration of getting an audience profile that matches the London population, which is what we want to do, and similarly our board [of trustees] needs to be diverse, and they recognise that and have been doing some things about it.

So this seven point plan that I talked about, has sections on all of these areas, around diversity of staff and volunteers and board, diversity of audiences, looking at programming, so but by programming, we mean temporary exhibitions, events, activities, schools, programmes, family programmes, etc.

We're slightly reliant on the national curriculum and any changes in the national curriculum for really making changes in the schools work. Because if, you know, we could put on loads of stuff about the colonial legacy, but if schools don't feel it meets their curriculum needs, then they won't come. So, it's really a discussion with -mainly primary school teachers are

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our audience- about how we can give them what they want in curriculum terms, while still exploring some of these issues. And you know, some of them are very difficult because they're kind of reception year kids and things like that, you've got you've got to build the audience at the same time. So absolutely. My mantra in our approach to events and activities is that anything, we do must either diversify the audience or make money or ideally both, but usually one or the other.

Tom Crowley 28:10

So, this is the concluding question. And just to give a little bit of context, so it's the University of Cambridge here, we're a research institution and on our website, discussing the project, you can see that, you know, we think this is an important moment [https://www.heritage.arch.cam.ac.uk/research-projects/uk-statues-project/uk-statues-project]. And, yeah, so we're interested in what useful role research organisations might take in terms of the research they do. So, the question is, what would you like to understand better in terms of making decisions concerning the legacy of slavery or colonialism?

Nick Merriman 28:54

Well, it's been my observation because I've spent most of my time in museums actually in higher education settings. But even then, there's a pretty large gulf, it seems to me between what museums do and are interested in and the research that academics do. And that's not to, you know, be detrimental towards academics, but it's just that the reward systems and systems of measurement are very different. And, you know, there's been some progress around the public engagement and impact agenda. But still, even when I was running a university museum, it was really hard to get much of an alignment between the academic world and the world of a museum delivering widening participation agendas and generally serving the local public. So, it's a difficult question for me to answer really. It's always quite hard. I mean, let's say let's take a practical example. We want to find out much more about the tea trade and the opium trade and the Opium Wars. Now, that's mainly, well that is a historical question. And we don't have any historians, so we kind of have to cast around. And the essential problem that one always comes up against is that even if you find somebody who's an academic, sorry, even if you find somebody who's say an anthropologist who's willing to help, there's no real structure or reward system for them to participate, so it's always done on a kind of, I'm doing this as a favour. We're doing, by the way, an exhibition on hair at the moment particularly focusing on hair stories, and trying to get, you know, the local Black community involved. We've had to find a way to find some funding to buy out an academic at Goldsmith's one day a week, whose work this is, and she would love to do it, but she just hasn't got time and unless the money is bought out. So, it's partly a question of finding out who's doing the work, and then finding a way for them to engage meaningfully in it in a system which doesn't reward that kind of activity. So, I mean, I've, as I said, having spent most of my career in higher education in museums, I'm a bit fed up and disillusioned by still the lack of articulation between the two. And even shared posts can be very difficult to work particularly for the individual who would feel pressured by the extreme demands of higher education which take huge amounts of time and by the different demands of the museum. So that's probably a bit

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of a rant about higher education in museums rather answering your question but do ask any further. If there's any— do probe more of this if I haven't quite answered it satisfactorily.

Tom Crowley 31:49

No, I think that's quite good. I think that quite neatly, knocked the ball back into the university's court. So, I think it's a very valid point. I'm trying to be very neutral this interview so I can't really comment, but it's a good answer. Unless there's anything else you want to say I'm going to stop the recording now. Is that a good idea?

Nick Merriman 32:43

No, I think that's absolutely fine. Yeah, fine. Happy for it to end.

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