Seven strategies for reframing photographic archives:

Archaeology, colonialism, and museums

Policy Brief

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POLICY BRIEF

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In the past few decades, museum professionals have increasingly sought to decolonise museums by acknowledging their institutions' colonial heritage and addressing imbalances of power and knowledge. Decolonising museums generally entails: (a) acknowledging the institution's colonial connections; (b) revealing the resulting injustices, biases, omissions, and poor decisions; (c) including diverse voices and multiple perspectives; and (d) behaving ethically towards the museum's stakeholders (Kreps, 2011; Van Broekhoven, 2019). As urgent as the task to define decolonising approaches in museums has become, it has yet to stimulate enough discussion on how to decolonise museum photographic archives.

This policy document offers seven strategies or recommendations for museums to decolonise or 'reframe' their colonial, archaeological photographic archives. These recommendations emerged from "De-colonizing archaeology related photographic archives", a 2022–2023 research project that investigated Cypriot photographic archives in archaeological museums in Cyprus and the UK (Hellenic Observatory, 2022). Our work with photographic archives in the context of this project led us to eschew the word 'decolonisation' in the title of the present document. Instead, we chose 'reframing', for two reasons. First, when it comes to current archaeological archives across museums and other collecting institutions, it is impossible to go back and change what was photographed or what was collected. These choices were often made by people in a specific colonial setting. Second, it is unwise to assume that an archaeological—or any other type of colonial-era—archive can be completely decolonised.

However, there are things that can be done to reframe colonial-era photographic material to acknowledge and reveal omissions and discuss diverse voices. In other words, to curate more sensitively, deepen the context, and problematise collections. We identified the following seven strategies for reframing photographic archives in museums and other collecting institutions:

(1) Acknowledge that a photographic archive is a product of its time
(2) Review and update terminology
(3) Research and enrich photographic archives
(4) Digitise and widen access
(5) Work with communities
(6) Reveal hidden stories
(7) Work with artists

The following sections give a brief overview of these strategies, with examples. While the recommendations are intended for colonial-era archaeological museums, they are also applicable to other types of museums, for example, science, history, and ethnographic museums.

1
Acknowledge that a photographic archive is a product of its time

As a product of its time, an archive contains inherent power imbalances and omissions. The first step is an internal, institutional understanding and acknowledgment of how archives are formed and the current role of archivists and museum professionals. Museum staff need to acknowledge that photographic archives are the result of a complex set of conditions and practices, and do not necessarily represent an objective documentation of the past. For example, photographic representations of archaeology (and their material manifestations) are influenced by what was considered important enough to capture, the discipline of archaeology, the possibilities of the photographic medium at the time, the standpoint of the photographer, and the broader sociopolitical environment. The content and condition of an archive also depends on the archiving practices of generations of professionals who, over the years, have sorted, categorised, and added information in relation to these archives.

The second step is for museums to then publicly acknowledge the power imbalances and omissions found in their archives; they can do this on their websites, at exhibitions, in publications, presentations, etc. This step equips audiences with a better understanding and awareness of the context in which these archives were first created.

2
Review and update terminology

The words we use when we write stories or refer to collections and archives matter. While museums still claim that they present objective and neutral stories, the words used for descriptions (such as "we" and "they", "our" and "their", and "here" and "there") often make assumptions and draw dividing lines (Zeefuik and Modest, 2018). Bennett (2020) stresses that researchers and archivists must write responsibly and correct the errors of the past, giving the example of the use of 'negro' in records produced as late as 2007. Even the most recently popularised acronym—BAME[1]—carries entrenched colonial views by suggesting that all those who are not white British could fit into a particular category, thus failing to distinguish between varied cultural experiences and understandings (Museums Association, 2021). Words and norms around language are constantly in transition and this can cause confusion, discomfort, and distress; nevertheless, museum culture must keep up with the times. As society changes, language changes with it (Modest and Lelijveld, 2018).

Some museums have started publicly acknowledging problematic terminology by including disclaimers on their websites. For example, the Medelhavet Museum in Sweden has an online collection database that displays a disclaimer as soon as you enter its website (Medelhavet Museum, 2020).[2] Others have reviewed and updated photograph descriptions to avoid perpetuating misconceptions and colonial attitudes. For example, at Oxford University's Institute of Archaeology, the word 'native' has been removed from their publicly available online repository (University of Oxford, n.d.). However, the original terminology is kept in the private, institutional repository as historic information that might be valuable for research purposes.

1   BAME is an acronym for 'Black, Asian, and minority ethnic'.
2   The disclaimer states: "Users of the database are warned that some records may include language or terminology dating from the 19th and 20th centuries which depicted people in ways that are obsolete and/or offensive. We are conscious that the inclusion of such terminology is problematic. As an institution, we have chosen to include this historical information in our database because it is part of the documentation for the object, photograph, or archival item".

3
Research and enrich photographic archives

Photographic archives are not static repositories. On the contrary, they change over time—they travel, separate and reunite, become digitised or enriched with text and new material, integrate with other archives, etc. One of the responsibilities of archivists is exploring the potential to fill collection gaps. This can be done through researching and adding information in the descriptions of the photographs; connecting with other archives outside the institution; or through acquiring and integrating alternative photographic archives. One straightforward, but quite challenging task, is to identify, name, and create biographies of the people presented in the photographs. In the Cyprus-related archaeological archives we examined, only foreign excavators were named in the photographs. More research is required to identify, name, and create biographies of the Cypriot agents and excavators who made a significant contribution to the excavations. Such information can enrich object descriptions, museum records, and photographic metadata, as well as related articles and exhibitions.[3] Naming individuals—especially those who have been in the margins of history for centuries—suggests an acknowledgment of their place in history.

However, identifying and naming might not suffice. Photographic archives in collecting institutions reflect the standpoints of certain individuals and disciplinary practices of the time, so museums need to consciously and actively collect—where possible—*alternative* photographic material created by locals, the press of the time, or tourists. Riggs (2019) calls these "expanded archives", because they hold the potential to reveal alternative narratives, fill in gaps, and provide a more holistic understanding of the past.

Another approach is to encourage the use of archives to develop counternarratives and grassroots critiques on archaeological practices—especially when local perspectives are involved. A good example of this approach is "Egypt's Dispersed Heritage", a project addressing the colonial history of Egyptian archaeology collections (Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson, 2021). While run by the UCL Institute of Archaeology, it involves Egyptian researchers and artists who address an Egyptian audience as they attempt to encourage critical readings from a local perspective.

3   See, for example, the work of Thomas Kiely, the A.G. Leventis Curator for Ancient Cyprus at the British Museum about Grigoris Antoniou—a local excavator (Kiely, 2021)

4
Digitise and widen access

Digitisation offers new ways to archive and facilitates comparisons and parallel viewings of different sources. It can also help bring together scattered, separated, or even mislabelled, segregated, or lost archives and make them more accessible. Indeed, technology has been essential in facilitating communities and institutions to collect, circulate, and make available images and resources that matter to them and do justice to a community's past (Iacovino, 2015; Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2022). However, digitisation without re-examination can reproduce existing biases and inequalities.

Some of the processes Bennett (2020) suggests for decolonising archives include: reunifying—at least digitally—those archives that have been separated or disrupted by colonialism; sharing the archives with the communities to whom they are most relevant and therefore making the archives accessible to them; working with those communities to redefine and repurpose materials; and removing colonial language from metadata.

A good example on how digitisation might help archivists and researchers revisit archives is Northeastern University's Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA). The ECDA has looked in various places to find and digitise early Caribbean colonial material—both textual and visual. The aim is to foreground indigenous narratives of survival and resistance in the Caribbean. The ECDA uses digitisation as a tool and a means to overcome monolithic narratives, with the institution stating: "a digital archive offers new affordances that invite researchers to disrupt, review, question and revise the colonial regime" (Northeastern University, n.d.). In other words, digitisation offers an alternative way of reading and interpreting an archive. A digital archive also offers new possibilities for re-archiving, such as 'remix and reassembly', a practice that facilitates the surfacing of parallel stories to the central and usually linear one found in printed texts.

5
Work with communities

Collaboration is also essential in any reframing effort. Collaborative research teams consisting of local and non-local researchers, or of researchers coming from both the coloniser and colonised backgrounds can be most effective. According to Namazi, the process of decolonisation requires "a direct dialogical interaction with those excluded from society; it has to be materialised through their values, their ethos and collective knowledge" (2020, p. 25). This is fundamental if the collaborative process is to challenge entrenched values and principles and have an impact beyond a simple review or revision of the dominant narrative. A good example of collaboration with communities is "Negotiating History: Photography in Sámi culture" (Lien and Nielssen, 2018), a collaborative research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council and administered by the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen. Its research team includes both Sámi and Norwegian scholars. The project studies the role and position of Sámi photographs in the past and present by: mapping and analysing photographs from the Sámi area kept in multiple and dispersed archives, museums, and other institutions in Norway; exploring new uses of historical photographs; and studying the recirculation of historical photographs within Sámi contemporary art (Lien and Nielssen, 2018).

6
Reveal hidden stories

Despite their inherent one-sidedness, photographic archives tend to contain visual traces of the unnamed and unacknowledged people engaged in archaeological excavations. These visual traces can be used to uncover suppressed or hidden narratives and to discuss the contributions of local men, women, and children in archaeology. This can be done with virtual or physical exhibitions that include photographic material.

A successful example of such an attempt is "Unsilencing the Archives: The Laborers of the Tell en-Nasbeh Excavations (1926-1935)", the 2021 virtual exhibition by the Badè Museum of Biblical Archaeology in Berkeley. The exhibition presented its photographic, film, and documentary archives of the Tell en-Nasbeh excavations. It paid tribute to the local men, women, and children who did the hard work for the foreign excavators at very low wages, without ever being credited or even being informed about the aims or findings of the digs (Badè Museum of Biblical Archaeology, 2021). The exhibition used unpublished photographic material to shed light on the value and significance of the local labour force used in the excavations and, in fact, names the people who were the "hidden hands" of orientalist foreign excavators in mandate-era Palestine (Badè Museum of Biblical Archaeology, 2021). The circumstances in which archaeological excavations took place in Cyprus during colonial times are strikingly similar to those in Palestine, as observed in the photographic archives we examined.

7
Work with artists

Artistic practices can play a role in revealing and highlighting omitted stories, as well as conducting institutional critique and archival activism. *Re*framing requires one to view and understand archives differently, to read them against the grain. Art provides room for such an undertaking and this has been the topic of a few recent conferences and seminars. For example, in a 2022 Association for Art History annual conference session, researchers discussed how contemporary artists examine the processes of remembering, forgetting, and memorialising through archival material: "From Fiona Tan to Dayanita Singh, Goshka Macuga, Rosângela Rennó, Walid Raad, Thomas Ruff, and many more, numerous contemporary artists investigate archives as a means of rethinking the past in the present" (Association for Art History, 2022).

Another recent example of the use of art practices in the interpretation and reframing of photographic archives is "In the sea of the setting sun-Contemporary Photographic Practices and the Archive", an exhibition at the State Gallery of Contemporary Art-SPEL in Nicosia, Cyprus. The exhibition presented 17 Cypriot artists whose work engages with contemporary photographic practices focusing especially on the research and use of the photographic archive. According to Dr Elena Stylianou, curator of the exhibition, the works:

> negotiate the tensions between romanticized understandings of the archive as a dusty place where one can retrieve treasures of the past and connect with history, and the archive as a metaphor or concept directly linked to the construction of interdisciplinary knowledge, systems of political imagination, power structures, the formation of national consciousness, and patterns of exclusion. (International Association of Photography and Theory, 2022)

Artistic work could, therefore, take advantage of its inherently extended freedom of movement and expression (compared to academic research) to function as a form of institutional critique or archival activism that illuminates gaps and omissions.

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