



# DECOLONISE!

An invitation to reflect on the Museum's past, present and future.

## Welcome to the Manchester Museum Decolonise! trail

**How did the collections in this museum get here?**

**Whose stories are told across the galleries?**

**How do museums shape our understanding of the world?**

Many European museums are a product of European colonialism, created to house and show off 'spoils of Empire'. 'Spoils' were cultural items, belongings, nature and ancestors taken from countries that Europe forced control over. For centuries, museums across Europe have documented and interpreted the world through these colonial collections, presenting the world and a version of history through a narrow, colonial lens.

Decolonising at Manchester Museum is a process that includes offering a transparent and more nuanced history of The British Empire and of the collections. This trail is an invitation to you, our visitors, to reflect on the questions above and to join us on our decolonising journey.

## Decolonise Trail is:

**An intervention.** Stops along the trail are here to disrupt the white, Eurocentric, colonial worldview that has shaped museums' presentation of history.

**An invitation.** Staff at Manchester Museum are engaged in critical reflection about the history of the Museum's collection and how it's used today. We would like our visitors to explore and reflect with us.

**Not the end.** This trail is a small part of our ongoing commitment to grapple with the Museum's legacies of Empire and to prioritise anti-racism, equity and justice in the Museum today.

The trail includes eight stops around the Museum. Some stops offer more context and untold histories of colonialism. Some pose questions about the past and future of the Museum collection. Some draw attention to decolonial narratives featured amongst galleries. Decolonise! Trail is a guide to help explore the relationship between museums, colonialism and wider issues of social justice. Why not break the trail up over several visits? There's lots to take in, don't feel you have to get to all the stops in one go.

Head to [museum.manchester.ac.uk/decolonise-trail/](https://museum.manchester.ac.uk/decolonise-trail/) or scan this QR code for a digital copy and the option to hear an audio recording of each tour stop.



You can find a glossary for key terms used in this trail at the end of this resource.

### Take care on the trail

**Decolonise! Trail** invites visitors to engage with history and collections at the Museum that include themes of racism, colonial violence and homophobia. Stops on the trail include galleries where there are ancestors or 'human remains' as well as taxidermy of dead animals.

Check in with how you're feeling along the trail and what you might need. There is a dedicated quiet space as well as a prayer and reflection room in the Museum for all to use. If you'd like to have a follow up conversation with a member of the team who worked on the trail you can email: [socialjustice@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:socialjustice@manchester.ac.uk)

Image:

Opium pipe, 1800-1950 (The Lee Kai Hung Chinese Culture Gallery).



# Belonging Gallery

Display: Relationships case

## How do museum displays shape our understanding of cultures?

In this comic, Congolese artist Edher Numbi encourages us to question stereotypes that have been created about African communities, especially African men. European colonialism crafted harmful and racist stereotypes of aggression, hyper-masculinity and hyper-sexuality about African men. Large museum displays of African spears and weapons have reinforced reductive and inaccurate ideas about African people and culture. Numbi reflected on this during the process of working with the Museum, sharing that “there is a lot of mischaracterisation of African warriors due to colonial (heteronormative) sanitisation of history so I want to play around with this”.

Enforcing religious and moral laws onto Indigenous communities was a tool of suppression used by European colonisers. For British colonies, this included the introduction of laws that criminalised

same-sex sexual acts. British gender ideals were enforced in a number of African countries and many still bear the legacy of them today.

Although sex between men was never made illegal in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there is widespread homophobia in the country. Many African scholars and human rights activists attribute this to a legacy of European colonial rule. Numbi's Congolese LGBTQ+ story confronts these legacies, illuminating the diverse experiences of gender and sexuality on the African continent, told through an African lens.

*Where else in the Museum can you find stories and perspectives from Indigenous or diaspora communities?*

Image:  
Edher Numbi, *Kaleidoscope of Spears* (detail), 2013



## 8 South Asia Gallery

Display: Singh Twins mural

### What do you know about Britain's rule over countries in South Asia?

*'Riches to Rags and Rags to Riches'* mural by The Singh Twins directly confronts the horrors of Empire. Stories of Britain's rule over historic India is retold and presented through a British South Asian lens. How many historical accounts of Empire have you come across that are told from the perspective of people whose countries were colonised? The Singh Twins reflect in the mural that *"not telling our own stories is like walking in the sand and leaving no footprints. We have no way of knowing where we came from or how we reached today"*.

Historical accounts of The British Empire often focus on the ways Britain developed itself through establishing trade overseas and how it brought education, morality and industry to countries it considered to be underdeveloped. Accounts of the true force, violence and inhumanity of Empire are rarely front and centre. Britain's image of itself in its retelling of Empire is usually one of the benevolent white saviour, the superior leader. We are shown, throughout the mural, many

examples of how skewed this portrayal of Britain is. Look for the quote featured on the second panel in the mural from William Hick, Britain's former Home Secretary. Britain's complete self interest in India and callous disregard for the local population is laid bare for us to see through this violent declaration.

By weaving histories of wealth and discovery in historic, pre-colonial India with the brutal realities of British occupation, alongside quotes exposing the true motivations of British colonial figures, The Singh Twins offer a much fuller understanding of this history.

***How does this account of The British Empire differ from historical narratives you've come across before?***

***Have you learnt anything new?***

Images:

Top: The Singh Twins, *Riches to Rags, Rags to Riches*, 2023 (South Asia Gallery).  
Below: (ibid. detail)





# Egypt and Sudan Gallery

Display: The coffins of Asru

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## Should a desire for knowledge override the wishes of ancient cultures?

A fascination with Ancient Egypt can be seen across the globe. We can see films, cartoons, books, and school curriculums dedicated to and influenced by our idea of what 'Ancient Egypt' was like.

Following the British invasion of Egypt in 1882, the European-controlled Egyptian government allowed archaeologists from Europe to export some of the items they excavated on Egyptian and Sudanese land. This led competitive and wealthy businesspeople to sponsor archaeologists to search for objects to be studied and displayed.

Manchester Museum benefitted from this colonial system; housing around 18,000 objects and ancestral remains from Egypt and Sudan. Excavation sponsors cared little about what their mass removal of Egypt's cultural heritage and ancestors meant for ancient or contemporary Egyptians.

Mummification rituals aimed to transform the body and to create a perfect, everlasting version of the

deceased. Ancient Egyptians believed this would enable their spirit to have a permanent physical presence, in order to exist forever.

*How might present day and Ancient Egyptians feel about Asru's unwrapped body being on display in this museum?*

Unwrapping and studying Ancient Egyptian ancestors has enabled scientists to develop understandings of human biology that have informed medical practices today.

*Are there ways to ethically extract knowledge from ancient civilisations who are not able to give consent?*

Image:  
Human remains, Late Period (Dyn. 26)

# Mineral Gallery

Display: Minerals hidden histories

## Do you know where the minerals in your technology come from?

Manchester Museum has over 20,000 minerals in the collection and 24% were acquired in a colonial context. Colonial rule over mineral-rich land enabled countries like Britain to develop great wealth from mining. Profits built personal fortunes for colonial leaders and helped to develop advancements in industry and technology across the Global North.

Extracting natural resources from countries in the Global South for overseas development and exploitation of human life is a colonial legacy that still shapes global mining industries today. Mining companies continue to make huge wealth from extracting minerals in the Global South, little of which makes its way back to people labouring in mines. For example, the cobalt mining industry in the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly colonised by Belgium, has come to international attention for exploitative, unsafe working practices. Cobalt is a mineral found all around us due to its use in

rechargeable batteries. If you have a smartphone or another portable device with you today, it probably contains this mineral.

Rechargeable batteries are a more environmentally-sustainable power source than using oil. As the world transitions towards greener technologies, the demand for cobalt continues to grow. There have been calls by activists to boycott buying new phones and technologies from companies who source minerals through unethical and unlawful means. Britain is a nation dependant on minerals to power our technologies.

***Do we have a societal responsibility to take action and push for a fairer, more ethical mining industry?***

**Images:**

Top: No. 33760. Black, Chinese and White labourers in a gold mine in South Africa, around 1910. Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection (Library of Congress), LOT 11356-39.

Below: Human moles follow the compressed air drill in the greatest gold bearing region of the world, Crown Mine, Johannesburg, S. Africa, about 1910. Original copyright, The Keystone View Company No. 33760.





## Living Worlds

Display: Domination case

### What impact has hunting animals had in countries across the world?

The interconnectedness of humans, nature and animals is central to many Indigenous beliefs and practices. European colonial thinkers believed in human domination over nature and that animals and the natural world existed for extraction and personal gain.

The impacts of colonial trophy hunting are long lasting - some former colonies have become reliant on international trophy hunting to support their economies and to help manage living alongside animals that can pose a danger to life.

Driven by a desire for wealth, power and scientific discovery, colonisers took as much as they wanted from the land and enforced their own approaches to managing natural resources. These actions destroyed natural habitats and contributed to the extinction of a number of animal species. Colonial hunters also regularly exploited Indigenous people, using their knowledge and labour to help with hunting expeditions.

Many wildlife conservationists oppose trophy hunting, viewing it as a threat to natural ecosystems and animal welfare. It's common for international campaigns to sideline the impact that colonialism has had on animal conservation practices. Interactions in these campaigns have mirrored colonial power dynamics, with countries in the Global North imposing values onto countries in the Global South.

***What could international conservation that centres Indigenous experience as well as the impact of colonial disruption look like?***

Trophy hunting was popularised by colonialism. Bodies, tusks, skins and heads of animals were bought back to Europe for private displays of conquest over nature, many were gifted and sold to natural history museums.



#### Images:

Top: Domination display case (Living Worlds Gallery).  
Below: Local hunting party, Wycombe Vale in the Eastern Cape c.1888. Photographer Robert Harris.

## What is Climate Justice?

The impacts of climate change are deeply interconnected with historical and ongoing systems of injustice. Colonial wealth funded industrial development in Europe, North America and other countries across the Global North. New machinery revolutionised how people lived but came at a great cost to people under colonial rule and the planet.

The concept of 'Climate Justice' emphasises that the climate crisis is a social and political problem, as well as an environmental one. It highlights that climate change impacts people differently. Countries across the world that are least responsible for contributing to climate pollution are often most at risk from the life-threatening, life-altering impacts of climate change. Many of these countries were once under colonial rule and as a result have had less control over their land and resources to prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change.

Climate justice is a lens that can be used to reflect on the impacts of

climate change in the UK too. The race and class divide present in colonial Britain that upheld power and privileges for the white middle and upper classes above everyone else is still present today. In the UK, air pollution is the largest environmental risk to public health. The most deprived 10% of areas in England experience the worst levels of air pollution, and Black, Asian, lower income and disabled people are statistically more likely to be exposed to illegal levels of air pollution.

***Are there solutions to the climate crisis that not only reduce pollution and restore biodiversity, but create a fairer and more just world in the process?***

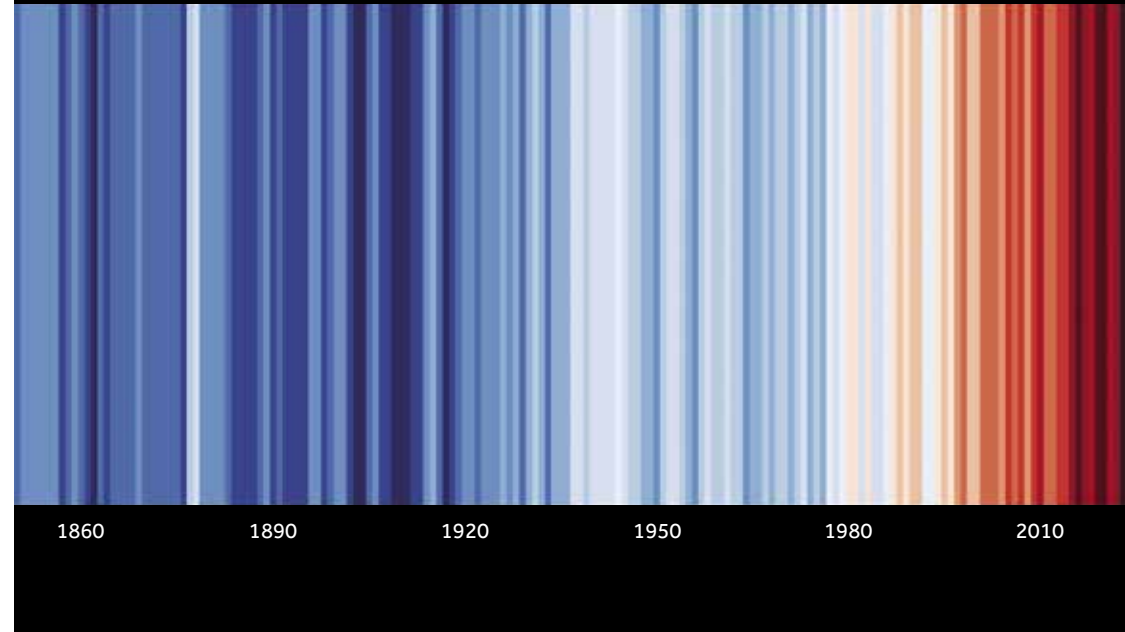
***What action can we take on a local and global level?***

**Images:**

Top: <https://showyourstripes.info/1> (Living Worlds Gallery).

Below: Pamela Singh, *Chipko Tree Huggers of the Himalayas* #4, 1994 (South Asia Gallery).

Global temperature change (1850–2024)



# Nature's Library

Display: Cabinets of Curiosity

## Whose view of the natural world is presented through these collections?

Cabinets of curiosity were popular during the height of European Colonialism. These private displays were a way for wealthy Europeans to show off their 'spoils of Empire'. This included belongings that were looted, confiscated and extracted (often described as 'collected') from countries across the world through colonial conquests.

It was common for cabinets to include spiritual belongings, natural and animal 'specimens' and Indigenous ancestors (sometimes referred to as 'human remains'). As well as a display of wealth and global connections, cabinets of curiosities were also a way for Europeans to construct and present their own scientific understandings of the world and of human cultures. For many, these worldviews were underpinned by a belief in white, European superiority. Items in cabinets were often positioned and narrated by curators and collectors disconnected

from the places from which they were taken. Indigenous knowledge, understanding and experience of the items displayed was rarely recorded or taken into consideration.

The knowledge that Europeans developed through studying colonial collections was exported across the world, adding to the ways that Europe asserted its power globally. The dominant categorising and understanding of the natural world today is still heavily shaped by this European lens.

*How might displays across Nature's Library differ if they were designed by Indigenous people from whose land the collections were taken?*

*Would they be categorised in the same way? Would they even be on display at all?*

Images:  
Living Worlds Gallery, (Floor 2).

# Ancient History Contemporary Belonging

Display: Lamps from Levant

## What and who decides the value of an object?

Mass collections of the same, or similar objects can be useful for studying and understanding histories. They can also reflect the greed and competitive spirit of colonial collectors. Value and status was often attributed based on the number of objects a country, person or museum had, with higher value given to objects considered to be rare.

The lamps in this display invite us to hear their own stories and offer their own perspective on their value. The lamps tell us how they feel about being kept in a museum drawer, how they were made and used before they were taken from their homelands. One lamp declares that they will only speak in "the language of the last nation who valued me correctly".

The stories of the lamps defy the ways colonial collectors valued objects in their possession. The lamps' inherent value is not defined by the collector but by the importance they played in the lives of their owners. Their value was felt through their maker's pride, through the ways they were needed and used.

In this case, artist Senna Yousef presents a selection of lamps from the Levant region as a metaphor for the shared experiences of migrants and displaced people. Colonialism forcefully and violently displaced millions of people, and museums all over the world house millions of displaced objects.

*What else might we learn from the journeys of objects in the Museum's collection?*

*What stories might they want to tell us?*

Image:  
Lamps, (Collections Reimagined Gallery).



**Colonialism** refers largely to European colonialism - where countries including England, Germany, France, Belgium and Portugal established Empires across the world. Empires were built by forcibly taking control over countries, mostly in the Global South. A belief in the supremacy of white Europeans was a principal ideology underpinning colonialism. This racist worldview was used to justify the violence that Europeans used to enforce their power. Colonial violence included killing Indigenous populations and settling on their land and enforcing religion, cultural practices, laws and enslaved labour onto Indigenous communities. Other actions included stealing and profiting off natural resources and cultural heritage - much of which became the founding collections for museums across Europe and are still held in museums across the world today.

**Decolonising** is a long-term process that starts with acknowledging the true, violent history of colonialism and how it shapes our world today. Decolonising identifies ways that colonialism has shaped the world around us (including for example, ways that we understand the world, societal power structures, laws and attitudes) and works to challenge or unpick them. Decolonising practice aims to build new ways of being and working that are based on values and principles of justice and decentres white, western systems of knowledge.

**Within a museum context, decolonising can include:**

- Critiquing colonial documentation of history.
- Returning collections to communities of origin.
- Dismantling embedded racist practices.
- Centering Indigenous and diaspora perspectives to shape engagement with, understanding and narration of collections.
- Prioritising justice for communities who were and are harmed by colonial violence.

### Colonial

Used to describe features of colonialism, to contextualise something or someone within a time of colonialism or having a legacy of colonialism. For example, 'Britain's colonial rule of India' or 'A colonial law' or describing the collection at a museum as having 'colonial roots'.

### Imperialism

Imperialism is about power and control, it refers to the domination of one country over another's economy and political and cultural systems. This is often through use of military force and other means. Imperialism restricts the independence of countries/ nations and their citizens.

### The British Empire

An empire is a group of countries/ territories that is controlled by one single entity. The British Empire refers to the countries that Britain forcibly took control and rule over.

### Global North, Global South

'The Global North and South' is a framework used to describe the relative wealth and international power of countries around the world. The framework is widely used but is also regarded as a contested concept. Global North generally encompasses countries in Europe, North America, Australia and some parts Asia. The Global South generally includes the countries of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania.

### Race

A human-made social construct, designed to categorise people based on physical features such as skin colour, hair texture and facial features. The idea of race is not biologically 'real', but the experiences of people based on their race, such as racism and privilege, are very real.

### Racism

Discrimination and prejudice against a person or community, based on their race, underpinned by an ideology of racial superiority and power. Racism can be interpersonal, structural, cultural and internalised.

### White supremacy

The belief that white people are superior to every other race. White supremacy as a belief has shaped the structures that underpinned European colonialism, which our world lives in the legacy of today. As such, many societal systems are built to uphold and maintain white superiority and best serve the interests of white people.

### Anti-racism

Actively taking steps to eradicate racism - this might include unlearning personal racism, educating others about racism, dismantling racist structures, laws and practices and challenging racism where it occurs. Anti-racism is an ongoing commitment, not a one-off action.

### Indigenous

Indigenous refers to people who have lived in a place from the earliest time, the people who originally inhabited a land and whose culture and lifestyle is unique to that place. Indigenous is change led by Indigenous people. It is a process of centring Indigenous People, their knowledge, experience and cultural practices. This is especially important in museums where knowledge about collections have been built excluding Indigenous consent and perspectives.

### Diaspora

Refers to a group of people who have moved away from the place they were born. For example, people born in Jamaica now living in England would be said to be a part of the 'Jamaican diaspora' - their children and grandchildren might also be considered to be in the Jamaican diaspora too.

### Social justice

Recognising the root causes of injustice and working to dismantle them. This can take the form of addressing imbalances of power, participation and resources in attempt to create a more just and fair society.

24 For further reading on colonial language see *The Decolonial Dictionary* by Shelley Angelie Saggar.  
[www.decolonialdictionary.wordpress.com](http://www.decolonialdictionary.wordpress.com)

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**Decolonise! Trail** was written by Manchester Museum's Social Justice Manager, with support from the wider Museum team.

If you'd like to know more about our social justice and decolonising work, you can visit the page on our website or email:  
[socialjusticemuseum@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:socialjusticemuseum@manchester.ac.uk)



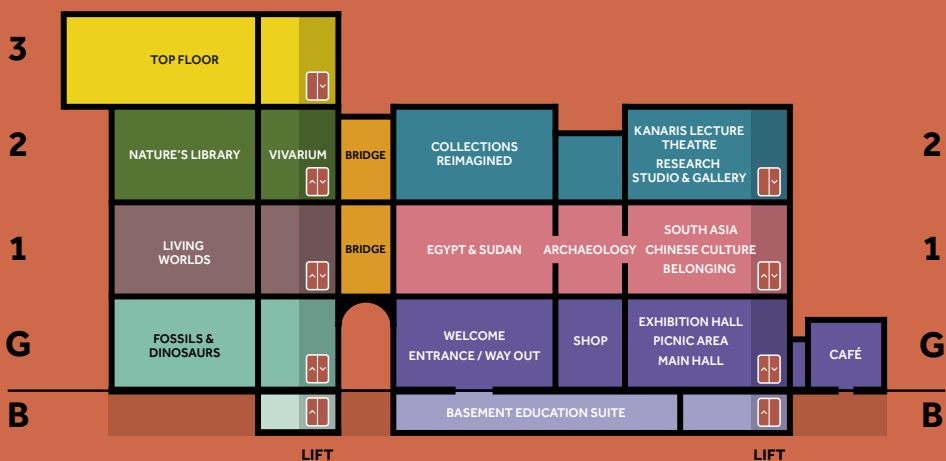
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**Images:**

Top: Anindilyakwa Arts: *Stories from our Country* display in the Belonging Gallery, Manchester Museum, 2025  
Below: Egypt Gallery, Manchester Museum, 1927



## Museum Floor guide



## Opening hours

Monday	Closed
Tuesday	10am – 5pm
Wednesday	10am – 9pm
Thursday	10am – 5pm
Friday	10am – 5pm
Saturday	8am – 5pm
Sunday	10am – 5pm

Last admission is 30 minutes before the Museum is due to close.

## Keep in touch, follow us on:

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