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NARRATIVES OF DISPLAY: PRESENTING AFRICAN ARTEFACTS IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN
ETHNOGRAPHY MUSEUMS.

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Tartu 2025

Field of Studies: Education in Museums and Heritage (EDUMaH)

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

International Master (IntM) in Education in Museums and Heritage: University of Glasgow, UK,
University of Malta

Master of Arts in Humanities (MA) in Folkloristics and Applied Heritage Studies: University of Tartu,
Estonia

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Elise Annick NGUEMA, 14.08.2025

Abstract

This thesis investigates the display and interpretation of African artefacts in ethnographic museums in Central Europe, specifically Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia. It questions museum neutrality and examines how the presentation of these objects affects public perceptions of African heritage. By analysing museography strategies, the research highlights how design and textual choices shape narratives around these artefacts. The study focuses on how African artefacts are contextualised within national histories, especially since these countries lack a direct colonial past. This research contributes to museum education by addressing the representation of marginalised groups and the social-political implications of permanent exhibitions.

Keywords: African Heritage, Ethnographic Museums, Museography, Central Europe, Narratives.

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Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to thank El Shaddai for renewing my strength and providing the guidance needed to achieve this goal. I would then like to thank my mother, father, and two sisters, with whom I engage in philosophical debates, and whose support means the world to me. I extend a warm thanks to my friends, who have pushed me to put out my best work. I also give many thanks to my master's thesis tutors, Ene Kõresaar, Sandro Debono, and Tawona Sithole, for their knowledge, expertise, and guidance through the process of producing this work . I would like to give a special thanks to the University of Glasgow, the University of Tartu, and the University of Malta for giving me the opportunity to complete my studies successfully. Additionally, I extend many thanks to the partners and lecturers who were a part of this EDUMAH journey, inspiring and pushing me all the way through my studies.

Thank you all for supporting and guiding me to where I am today, and may El Shaddai continue to bless you all!

Written on the 31/07/2025

Elise Annick NGUEMA

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Education was not always the primary purpose of museums. Initially, referring to the physical building that houses the collections (Tulliach, 2017, p.344), museums transitioned from private to public institutions during the 19th century. They became a way to introduce morals and values deemed fit for 'a proper society' (Bautista, 2014, p.25) to a broad audience. Used as public education tools and considered as the authority on the subject presented, displays would showcase objects in 'a neutral' environment (Miller, 2018, p.8). This practice positioned museums as trusted institutions, where the content displayed was considered authentic (Karp, 1991, p.4). This assertion has since been challenged when, in 2020, the then ICOM president Suay Akosy declared, 'Museums are not neutral. They are not separate from their social and historical context.' (ICOM, 2021). In 'The Anatomy of a Museum' (2018), Steven Miller argues that museum education can be conceived in two ways: overt and covert. The more common definition of education refers to measures implemented by institutions to facilitate learning in the museum space, including formal programmes, activities, and events. However, Hein (2002) highlights a more passive form of learning known as 'meaning-making'. It is communicated through the curator, making exhibition spaces the primary point of contact between visitors and the subject (Miller, 2018, p.139). This exchange occurs through how objects are presented (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995, p.6), informed by the discipline known as museography. This thesis uses the premise that exhibition design, a meaning-making tool, is a vital component of museum education, as it shapes visitors' understanding and interpretation of the topic.

The statement that museums are places where ideas are cemented holds more weight considering their role as perpetrators of colonial rhetoric. Aldrich (2009, p.138) claims museums were founded to promote colonialism. Colonisation refers to the 'historical process involving Western powers exerting power over non-Western territories between the 15th and mid-20th centuries' (Duvisac, 2022, p.2). Throughout this period, traders, missionaries, administrators, and others brought back to Europe quantities of artefacts, collections that eventually were donated or acquired by museums. Ethnographic museums were specifically used as a resource to display these acquisitions, demonstrating evolutionary principles (Roigé et.al., 2022, p.166), justifying the superiority of the coloniser, and theorising racist hierarchies between cultures. Some of the objects in these collections have unclear provenance and acquisition histories. Some, on the other hand, were taken in violent circumstances. As Luini (2023, p.90) and Sarr & Savoy (2018, p.3) estimate, 90% of African cultural heritage is displayed or stored in Western museums. Such a significant number warrants the study of these categories of artefacts. This thesis aims to question the lingering rhetoric present in museums through the analysis of their content and object presentation.

Indeed, although the physical end of colonisation for former colonised countries occurred massively in the 1960s, Grosfoguel (2007, p.14) argues that eliminating tangible colonial administrations doesn't suffice to

incur true decolonisation. Watts (2020, p.347) posits that colonial exploitation is still perpetrated through coloniality. By positioning itself as a neutral exterior, Europe could justify its civilising project towards those considered 'subaltern' (Dussel, 1993, p.66). These power dynamics and knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) continue to have ramifications in formerly colonised/imperial societies, particularly in their respective museums. In the present century, ethnographic museums, trying to adapt to an increasingly multicultural society, end up undergoing repackaging to avoid dying out (Segalen, 2005, as cited in Roigé, 2018). Through decolonial museology, interpreted and documented within a Eurocentric framework, ethnographic collections in Western European countries are starting to be viewed through a new gaze, a decolonial one. These epistemological frameworks don't only extend to the societies whose history was built on having a colonial empire; they can spread to those under dominion and those situated in the periphery (Ndlovu, M., 2018, p.95). When addressing the impact of colonialism in museums, research mainly focuses on Western Europe, as those countries have overt ties to colonial history. Yet, little literature homes in on the colonial narrative embedded in societies with a more covert colonial past, such as Central European countries.

1.2 Statement of research

This thesis seeks to understand how African artefacts are displayed and interpreted within permanent exhibitions in national ethnographic museums of Central Europe. Following the premise that museums aren't neutral, it questions how objects belonging to the global majority and regional minority are presented and seeks to find out what covert narratives exhibition displays convey. Through analysing museographic strategies, this paper explores how design choices influence the inclusion or exclusion of African perspectives and frame public understanding of African heritage. Focusing on museums in Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia, focusing on countries with no overseas colonial territories, the research explores how African artefacts are contextualised within larger national, European, and colonial histories. Ultimately, it seeks to uncover whether these institutions perpetuate exclusionary narratives or contribute towards a more inclusive and diverse public discourse.

1.3 Research questions

- How do ethnographic museums in Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia construct narratives around African artefacts, and what role do minority perspectives play in these narratives?

- How are African artefacts contextualised within national or European identity narratives, and what implications does this have for representing colonial legacies?
- How do museographical choices (e.g., spatial design, lighting, labelling, and interactive elements) influence the representation of African artefacts and the messages conveyed about African heritage?

1.4 Case Studies

I have chosen to compare 3 museums: the Weltmuseum Wien in Austria, Vienna (WMW), the Néprajzi Múzeum in Hungary, Budapest (NM) and the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Slovenia, Ljubljana (SEM).

The choice of these museums as case studies can be justified as all three hold significant collections of African artefacts and display a selection in their permanent exhibitions. Indeed, the Weltmuseum Wien numbers an inventory of approximately 848 objects from Sub-Saharan Africa (Haumberger, n.d.), the Néprajzi Múzeum 10,000 objects (Neprajzi Muzeum, n.d.), and the Slovene Ethnographic Museum that holds about 10 000 the items in their international collection (Slovenski etnografski muzej, 2015). All three structures are ethnographic museums, with two of the three museums having had their permanent exhibitions recently refurbished and one in the process of being re-examined (the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum). The museums selected have a more or less minority-inclusive stance. Weltmuseum Wien (WMW), for instance, ratified the *Heidelberg Statement* (Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft, 2019), an agreement with 20 different ethnographic German and Swiss organisations committed to promoting a decolonial approach in their interpretation of collections and displays. The Néprajzi Múzeum (NM), on the other hand, states in its mission statement that it aims to foster dialogue, particularly through projects with the immigrant community in Budapest. Finally, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) positions itself as ‘about people, for people’ and has collaborated with the SWICH project. The SWICH (Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity, and Heritage) project, which involved ten European museums, aimed to reconsider ethnographic museum practices within the context of a post-migrant society (Slovenski etnografski muzej, n.d.). The museum, through the project, has curated temporary exhibitions on African Slovenes and the historical interactions between Slovenia and Africa. Not initially considered as deciding factors, the selected museums have other similarities that should be noted: All three museums are considered to have a national status; all three countries were once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an empire whose ties with slavery and colonisation have only recently been researched. This common past has led to the opinion in public discourse, specifically amongst Slovenians and Hungarians, that they perceive themselves as historically colonised.

1.5 Structure of the research

The research begins with a review of the scholarship surrounding ethnographic national museums, contextualising each museum's historical background and discussing the politics of display. The review also gives an understanding of the unique case of Central European colonial covert involvement and explores the historical realities of exhibiting global majorities, specifically African artefacts. The thesis then continues with a breakdown of the methodology used to complete this study. Throughout the data analysis chapter, the display techniques and textual materials from the permanent exhibitions will be examined, exploring how they affect the interpretation of the objects displayed in the space. Finally, in a comparative conclusion, I consider how ethnographic museums in Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia construct narratives around African artefacts, and what role minority perspectives play in these narratives. I will also address how African artefacts are contextualised within national or European identity narratives and what implications this has for representing colonial legacies.

2. Literature Review

This thesis examines how museography in ethnographic museums influences the inclusion or exclusion of minorities in narratives surrounding African artefacts in their permanent exhibition. Major public museums in England, France, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands collectively account for over half a million objects in their collections and on display (Schung, 2024). The past decade has seen increased discussions regarding repatriation, understood as the return of artefacts to their country of origin, culture, or owner. This debate has been a longstanding of a topic, a taboo discourse (Tezoto de Lima, 2023), finding some western museums dismissing the cases based on current legal ownership (Godwin, 2020, p.147; France Diplomacy, 2021) defending widespread access to the artefact in universal museums (Fiskesjö, 2010), and questioning the ability of the host museum to care for and safeguard the object (Murphy, 2024, p.1398). Opposing these statements, source communities claim their right to property that has at times been acquired through painful means (Savoy & Meyer-Abich, 2022, p.31) and should be taken care of by those who originated it (African Digital Heritage, 2018). Though on a case-by-case basis, the core disagreement is a different understanding of artefacts and their role, as an object is to be appreciated as art or a symbol far greater than its material form (Liuni, 2023, p.90). Repatriation discourses highlight power imbalances, which result in highly dependent institutions in possession of the artefact needing to be ‘convinced of its moral necessity’ (Kaplan, 1996, p.347). Considering the bureaucracy and political stakes of repatriation, lengthening the time these objects stay on the European continent, this thesis focuses on a different line of inquiry: How do institutions deal with the exhibition of African artefacts on the continent? This chapter is divided into four sections, looking at the core themes underpinning this paper: museums, narratives and display. The first part will address the specificities of ethnographic museums and aim to understand their historical and contemporary contexts. The second section will dive into each museum chosen for this comparative analysis, explaining how the African collections were formed. The third section will focus on the concept of narratives, aiming to understand the institution’s role in the memorialising process. It will explore how this can impact the presentation of artefacts that hail from contested heritage. It will also aim to clarify national museums’ role in forming a country’s identity, tackling how minorities and their heritage are interpreted as a political underpinning. The final part speaks on museography and its impact in relaying the messages held by the museum. Looking at the importance of architecture, layout, lighting and colour choices, the section will address decolonial museology as a solution to counter the harmful epistemologies that could be transmitted through design.

2.1. Central European ethnographic museums: a discipline and institutions tied to a colonial past

2.1.1 The origin of ethnography

Atkinson et. al. (2007, p.28) define ethnography as the experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting through observation and participation. The first mention of it dates back to 1800, tracing its roots to early anthropology, which aimed to study cultures and people groups outside of Europe. Ethnography first established itself as the study of the 'primitive', those cultures and people who weren't industrialised, describing and photographing its subjects, detaching their observation from opinion or sentiment to achieve an objective viewpoint (Atkinson et.al., 2007, p.28). However, these observers saw the world through a lens that considered their culture the default and compared it (Mitchell, 1989, p.219). Through ethnography, colonialism was presented as a natural or anthropological outcome of history. These 'assertions' proved the superiority of the European way of life, giving legitimacy to the subjection of populations considered as subaltern (Modest & Augustat, 2023, p.79). Indeed, influenced by observation sciences such as anthropology, race during the 19th century was defined through scientific theories of physiological difference, such as skin colour. As the slave trade was booming, legal justification needed to be established to determine the status of enslaved and non-European people, and proving it scientifically would be advantageous (Leveque, 2021). But as David Graeber (cited in Hicks, 2020, p.190) argues, 'It was not the 'Otherness' of Africans that ultimately drove Europeans to extreme caricatures but rather the threat of similarity, which required the most radical rejection.'

2.1.2 Ethnographic museums

Ethnographic museums were created to offer those who couldn't access ethnographic literature a glimpse into the newest studies on 'discovered' societies (Harris & O'Hanlon 2013, p.8). This type of museum emerged during the colonial period, with its collection holding artefacts from around the world, enabling Europeans to experience a safe but immersive, potent contact with the 'other worlds' (Edwards et.al., 2006, p.203) from which they sprang. Objects from different continents, understood under the discipline as 'primitive', provided a clear point of comparison between the fabricated "Other" and the enlightened Metropolis (Pawłowska, 2020, p.164). Following the new vocation of the changing museum institution, the ethnographic museum teaches visitors through the exhibition of counterexamples, the conduct deemed appropriate for society. Ethnographic museums of the 19th century are intrinsically linked to colonial conquest. As Edwards et.al. (2006, p.209) assert, 'collecting is a form of conquest and collected artefacts are signs of victory over their former owners and places of origin'. Traders, missionaries, merchants,

diplomats, colonial officers, artists, members of the navy, (world) travellers, collectors, geographers, members of the court and many others have bought, gifted, traded, looted, stolen and taken by force objects that were then donated or sold to ethnographic museums (Haumberger, 2021, p.146). During the 19th century, ethnographic museums provided a place to study or learn about other cultures. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991, p.387) states, 'ethnographic artefacts are objects of ethnography, created by ethnographers'. Objects that have been defined, segmented, detached and carried away by ethnographers. In other words, it is not the origins of the objects that make them an ethnographic object, but the lack of context surrounding them.

McLeod (2005, p.186), in her work 'Reshaping Museum Space', highlights ways this sense of 'otherness' shows up in displays. She argues that using different, segregated spaces to distinguish between various groups, of colonial verbiage in the textual interpretation, and the absence of other people represented in a space is neither inconsequential nor arbitrary. Fanon describes the consequences this has on those who are the recipients of it, claiming that as a Black man, this gaze dislocates, amputates and disembowels him, stripping him of his humanity and reducing him to an object (as cited in Abraham, 2022, p.67). W.E. Dubois (1996, p.4) describes how a person from a global majority might feel, needing to develop what he calls a Third Eye, 'constantly looking at oneself through the eyes of others'. Similarly, a museum projecting an imperial gaze turns humans and their cultures into researchable and consumable goods, perpetuating a narrative reinforcing negative self-perception.

During the 2010s, prominent ethnographic museums carried out significant overhauls, distancing themselves from the association with ethnography and its past, renaming or changing premises (Harris & O'Hanlon 2013, p.8). Ethnographic museums had to grapple with a question formulated by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (as cited in Landkammer, 2018, p.79): Who can assume the right to own and represent the material culture of others? As museum publics have diversified, so have the roles of exhibitions, increasingly demanded to adapt to cultural background, learning styles or social perspectives (McLean, 1999, p.83). In narratives of this time, the African continent is often viewed as 'the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation'(Achebe, 1978, p.2). Studying its display nowadays enables us to highlight many of the misinterpretations that may occur in other global majority displays throughout contemporary ethnographic museums.

2.1.3 Central European ethnographic museums: Colonialism without colonies

Most literature presenting artefacts connected to colonial stories focuses on Western European museums due to their proximity to colonial history. Little literature extends to Central European museums, which remain modelled on Western museology (Council for European Studies, 2025, p.3). Austria, Hungary and

Slovenia, the three countries of interest, have interesting past ties, through their belonging to the Habsburg empire spanning from 1770 to 1918, across which it is addressed through several names, Habsburg Monarchy, Habsburg Empire, the Austrian Empire or the Austria-Hungary Empire (Judson, 2016, p.9). Austria and Hungary have a complex history, well before the Habsburg empire, spanning nearly four centuries (Pálffy, 2009, p.16). Co-ruling at times, Hungary found itself partaking in the administration of the empire and weighing in on the decision-making. In other instances, Hungarians were subject to the domination of the empire. Slovenia, on the other hand, following its 1866 defeat in the war against Italy, saw its territory divided between Italy, Austria, and Hungary. This rule ended with the end of the First World War, where Slovenes united with Croats and Serbs and constituted the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (SHS) in 1918 (Perovšek & Godeša, 2016, p.5). Until recently, research into the colonial past of the Habsburg Empire has been largely unexplored in Austrian and Hungarian historiography. According to Csaplár-Degovics (2024, p.250), 'the Habsburg Empire did not consider itself a colonial power and did not represent itself as such'. The definition of a colonial power is a country that enacts colonialism, which is the practice of domination, involving the subjugation of one people to another (Reddy et.al, 2024). Setting its sights inland through the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Ruthner et.al., 2015, p.7), the Habsburg Empire didn't 'own' any international colonies. However, Sauer (2012, p.5) states that one way Austro-Hungarian involvement in colonisation is evidenced is through scientists or explorers conducting 'geographical research' in Africa. He stipulates that these people were involved in both the informal and formal aspects of overseas expansion. Indeed, the travellers aren't only individuals in their institutional contexts and representatives of imperial institutions (Sauer, 2012, p.10). In Austria and Hungary, missions either consisted of working as administrative officials for the Belgian Congo Free State, the German colonial empire or were sponsored by the Austrian government. However, in Slovenia, Catholic missionaries were sent on a civilising mission to the eastern parts of the African continent (Polajnar, 2021, p.61). Missionaries would bring back artefacts from their trips, which were then gifted to the museum. Figures like Knoblehar went as far as bringing back to Slovenia 'African' enslaved children for public baptism ceremonies in the 1850s in the hopes of training them as missionaries (Mesarič, 2021, p.263). Catholicism was thought to be a way to redeem African bodies (Okyerefo, 2021, p.303). The role of religion as a justification for colonialism appears to be more present in Slovene archival material. Although not direct perpetrators of colonial violence, violence against the local population during scientific trips was frequently used, extorting food, porters or guides, enforcing passage or simply as a deterrent or punishment (Sauer, 2012, p.9). Furthermore, some objects acquired later through auctions might have a provenance entrenched in looting. This is the case with the Benin bronzes displayed in the WMW. These sculptures, made of brass and bronze, were dispersed throughout the world after the capital of the West African empire was destroyed by British forces in 1897 (British Museum, 2025). Hungary and Austria also signed the Congress of Berlin in 1884, sharing the African continent with European nations, otherwise known as the Scramble for Africa (Sauer, 2012, p.7). This conference is an essential milestone in the history of

colonialism that led to a crucial period of legitimising the supervision of the African continent for its development, with European nations drawing border lines, uprooting entire populations, and increasing the assimilation of said people into European civilisation (Van der Linden, 2017, p.4). Another indicator of colonial knowledge systems is the presence in Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia of ‘human zoos’, also called ethnic shows, which occurred throughout Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries (Czarnecka & Dagnosław, 2021). Archival materials reveal the passing of many ethnographic villages being held in and on the outskirts of Ljubljana, reporting at least three different ‘Sudanese villages’ coming to perform in the capital city (Polajnar, 2021). All mentioned occurrences show that even though countries are considered a periphery, which did not sit at the centre of European imperial power, they could still be involved in imperial projects. Museum collections are tied to the collectors who donated them to the institution, framing how they are perceived, what objects are safeguarded and exhibited and the information collected about them. The question of narrative building around said artefacts in permanent collections warrants studying, as each country has individually or collectively been involved. As Ticklin (2023, p.25) puts it, ‘Colonialism travelled in ways that were not geographically contiguous, and there are no borders to colonial ideas’. Additionally, in the wake of the rise of far-right ideologies Europe-wide, what narratives are portrayed by museums regarding how ‘The Other’ (for this study, African heritage) is conceptualised and portrayed through artefact selection and museographical devices?

2.2 Narratives

2.2.1 Narratives in museum history

Narratives are an account of events presented with the function of ‘reporting’ facts (Genette 1972, p.161). They form the crux of the messaging and articulate the way information is presented. Museums have shifted across time through several phases, each emphasising the institution’s specific roles. According to Simmons (2016, p.21), the word museum first referred to a physical building that housed private collections, then gradually transitioned into catering for a wider public. The institution took on socialising its visitors to morals and values deemed fit for ‘a proper society’ (Ariese & Wróblewska, 2021, p.38). Viewed as symbols of a ‘higher social class’ (Kelly, 1984, p.25) and keepers of knowledge, museums reflect the appearance of neutrality and impartiality (Staatliche Museen, 2024). However, recent literature disagrees with the unbiased nature of the institution, clarifying the role that patrons, funding, donors, curators, governments and political parties have played in shaping the meaning-making of the museum (Evans et.al., 2020, p.20). This neutrality has been contested, with scholars recognising that an institution claiming to be unbiased can also ‘support the status quo’ through its messaging (Steinhauer, 2018, as cited in Evans, 2020, p.21). Indeed, neutrality, according to Minott (2019, p.567-568), fails to address complicity or involvement, and this

omission is, in essence, political. It denotes a fear of being held accountable? Neutrality, then, is anything but neutral and is contingent on the museum's assumptions about who the audience is (Minott, 2019, p.567-568). Zabalueva (2023, p.136), in her article 'Museology is not neutral: Thinking museums politically', reminds that this position isn't a unanimous understanding of museum function and is still a taboo position to hold. Indeed, museums have a long tradition of upholding dominant narratives. Dominant narratives can be defined as the perpetuation through text, visuals and object selection, the history of the dominant culture leading to the exclusion of marginalised groups in the national narratives (Neves, 2023, p.1). Bourdieu (1991) qualifies this reinforcing of power dynamics as 'symbolic violence', turning museums into powerful political tools as custodians of a country's cultural memory and historical continuity. Nowadays, more progressive museums aim to challenge their neutral status by acting as contact zones, defined by Pratt (1991, p.34) as social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often over contexts deemed as polarising, such as colonialism and slavery. According to Sandell (1998, as cited in Coleman, 2016, p.4), there are three degrees of inclusive museums: The first tier, which prioritises the inclusion of objects and exhibits that represent the marginalised portions of their society, the second tier, which is an agent of social regeneration, connecting and integrating marginalised communities in their events, curatorial decisions and processes. The last tier publicly acknowledges its societal role, is vocal, and enacts broad social change, influencing the society in which it operates (Coleman, 2016, p.4). However, these shifts are still a work in progress throughout Europe, and this headway is even slowing down due to several factors.

2.2.2 Institutional constraints

Some factors can prevent institutions from engaging with the full extent of this heritage and newfound critical, reflexive role. In their recent survey, the Network of European Museum Organisation (NEMO, 2021, p.10) reported that two in ten museums claim to respond to polarising topics actively. The report addresses several barriers which can affect the reluctance of institutions to engage with unauthorised discourse positions (NEMO, 2021, p.7): 'funding and budgetary constraints, dependence on government for said funding, political interference in governance, political appointment of directors and board members, pressure to align with political agendas, pressure from interest groups and public opinion influence, censorship, self-censorship or obligation to publish statements'. (NEMO, 2021, as cited in Nguema, 2025). Moreover, the report revealed that 6 out of 10 museums are affected by political pressure (NEMO, 2021, p.5). Museums in Central and Southeastern Europe seem to be more likely to experience high levels of political meddling and influence (Baere, 2022, p.1). This interference holds even more weight in museums holding national collections, as all three museums studied in this thesis do. As a national symbol, the museum and its messaging represent the imaginations and interpretations of the nation's origin, past,

present and future (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2015, p.7). As Yngvéus et.al. (2023, p.8) claim, ‘heritage references the past; it isn’t history, but selected fragments of the past that are curated as memories, through processes of selection and simplification.’. These imaginaries then reinforce dominant narratives about identity and belonging, which can justify dismissing alternative readings and experiences of history. In countries with populist or nationalist governments, museums might also face censorship or negative consequences for presenting content that doesn’t align with the government’s directives. The past decade of forced resignations of museum directors has occurred in several Central European countries, namely Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia (Marshall, 2021, p.1; Leser et.al., 2024, p.487). Therefore, the political climate of the countries studied in this thesis should be considered when analysing the narratives put forward.

2.2.3. Whose voice?

According to the latest International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (CIMAM, 2023) survey, the role of curators extends to conserving and restoring artworks and historical items, conducting research on museum collections, and planning and organising exhibitions. In traditional museum exhibitions, the voice of the exhibition is curatorial authorship, which plays an essential part in the narrative running through the space. Similarly to ethnography, the curator, an observer and mediator between visitor and displayed subject, imbues the exhibition with their perspectives and subjectivities. Academic discourse challenges the position of the curator as the sole knowledge bearer, especially when curating an exhibition about different cultural groups and their artefacts. As Longair (2015, p.3) argues, curatorial authority demands an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the institution’s collection, which makes it an important position to hold. However, access to this position and the world of curation is inherently exclusive and academic. An Arts and Heritage Sector Report (Art Fund, et.al., 2022, p.28) has noted that curators have expressed a need for more diverse staff, stating the need to ‘hand over power’(as cited in (Nguema,2025). Some spoke of the ‘gatekeeper syndrome’, this sense that ‘bringing in diverse staff was threatening, rather than an opportunity to innovate and reach new audiences’ (Art Fund et.al., p.29) and denounced class bias in senior sector leadership (Art Fund et.al., p.30, as cited in Nguema,2025). While these statistics are for the United Kingdom, which has 18% of its population belonging to African, Asian or mixed ethnic groups, one can deduce that countries with lower populations of global majority individuals would reflect lower statistics (Nguema, 2025). If there isn’t a change in people in decision-making roles, similar outcomes will occur. As evidenced earlier in the paper, this shift in understanding museums as neutral entities to institutions capable of a voice, upholding or challenging the status quo, has led to the elaboration of new practices seeking to question whose history is being told. Whose perspective is being privileged? (Bayer & Terkessidis, 2017, p.1). These underline the urgent need to reframe power dynamics

embedded in traditional museum practices. Indeed, in ethnographic museums, minority groups have been 'discussed, exhibited, and interpreted, but were never able to 'talk back.' (Tythacott, 2010, p.4237). In response, community-led initiatives offer a promising model that centres the community, giving power and agency back to the people represented to decide how they are displayed, addressing their concerns and experiences. (Nguema, 2025). However, the implementation of this approach isn't without effort. Spivak (1999, p.67) ponders whether the exhibition of subaltern-speaking museums is impossible. There is still a fear that the less the curator is involved, the less command of knowledge and quality will emanate from the final exhibition. Wallen et.al. (2024, p.3) qualify this well-established trope in Western museological literature as the excellence/access dichotomy and assert that this perspective lacks awareness of the actual knowledge the community can provide (Nguema, 2025). This assertion can be linked to Freire (as cited in Darder, 2024, p.96), who stipulates that hegemony normalises and renders common sense the one-dimensionality of the dominant opinion. If interpretation is the role of curators, then allowing the community to speak about their cultural heritage seems paramount, re-establishing the ownership of these items. Additionally, Crooke (2008, p.131) writes that it is in the museum's interest to prioritise the community's views, as the museum wouldn't be of importance without the connections created by community work. Therefore, giving centre stage to communities that haven't benefited from being represented can increase our understanding of ourselves and one another. (Syson, as cited in Puddle & Katwala, 2023, p.10).

2.3. Museography

2.3.1 Definition of museography

While museology refers to 'the study of museums', understanding its history, role in society and the institution's organisation, museography deals with the practical aspects of carrying out the museum's function, the applied aspect of museology. (Pagán & Vives, 2022, p.26) It embodies what Etz et.al (2024, p.2) describe as the practices that give form and spatial order to narratives in aesthetically specific ways. Museography has many components: architecture, interior design, scenography, exhibition design, and exhibit presentation. Mclean (1999, p.83) asserts that museums are not without exhibitions. Museography can therefore be considered an active tool in museum exhibitions, as it is the first point of contact mediating between the visitor and the presented objects. Indeed, Boyd (1998, p.185) claims that although museums display objects, they are places of ideas, which frame how visitors interact with them. An object in a museum is never just an artefact; how it is displayed, contextualised and mediated plays a significant role in the narrative. Through its text and display, the museum chooses what it simplifies and selects, which impacts visitor perception towards said material culture (Davallon, 2010, p.230).

Although Etz et.al. (2024, p.2) stipulate that there is no fixed form of spatial design for museums, they note that some aesthetic and spatial types have emerged during the evolution of the museum, whether it be the cabinet of curiosities, the evolutionary sequences arrangements found in universal museum displays or the White Cube model becoming normative in modern museums. These displays and many more reflect the framework through which their makers operated (Nguema, 2025). Indeed, in the interpretation of visual culture, Hopper Greenhill states that ‘the concept of looking is complex and involves the person who looks, the object that the person views, and the physical location of the object’ (as cited in Buffington, 2005, p.275). Visuality, the ways that vision is shaped through social context and interaction (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p.12), is an important concept that can be applied to museums to analyse the dynamics of looking, perceiving and being seen (Nguema, 2025). The ‘exhibitioner complex’, for instance, coined by Bennet (1980, p.76), infers that exhibitions and spatial layout played a role in the civilising mission of 20th century museums, allowing viewers to project themselves and identify with the side of power, both the subjects and objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as known by power.

2.3.2. Architecture: Circulation and object placement

Architecture psychology research, which theorises the impact museum buildings have on object and narrative perception, contends that the architecture of an institution conveys information about its function and role in society. Historically, European colonial influence was responsible for the appearance of museums worldwide, which often resembled a classical temple, alluding to their intellectual heritage and the material wealth required to build them (Farahat & Osman, 2018, p.69). As Lambert (2020, p.1) states, ‘[a]rchitecture is, above all else, a materialisation of power relations and the enforcement of their potential violence.’ This violence metaphorically describes the feelings individuals might have towards their surrounding spaces. Minorities can experience this violence through a lack of representation or the reminder of a system that has oppressed or excluded them from history (Tschumi, 1981). Although different in appearance, modern museums still aim to communicate their role in the public space through their refurbishments or innovative *bâtisse*. By taking up space in the public eye and differentiating itself through technological achievements, it becomes what Peressut (1999, as cited in Barranha, 2009, p.3) calls a ‘modern monument to the metropolis’. The inside of a museum gives just as many physical translations of the institution’s policy or ideological positioning. For instance, how museum-goers navigate the exhibition space contributes to the learning experience in museums. The design encourages visitors to move in specific ways through exhibitions and impacts how the objects are viewed, accessed and understood. Basu (2006, p.86) suggest, for instance, that a clearly defined path could connote a set way through which the museum wishes to convey its information, leading to a hierarchical imparting of knowledge, whereas more freely

weaving pathways indicate a co-construction of knowledge prompted by the visitor's choices (Basu, 2006, p.86). However, Choi (1999, p.9) has found that the visitor still requires signs and prompting to navigate a space, with total freedom resulting in the visitors seeing less of the collection on display. Wineman & Peponis (2010) distinguish spatially guided movement, spatially dictated movement and spatially random movement, with the former providing a more fulfilling museum experience. However, all these observations should be mitigated because they have been studied in Western contexts and might not apply to all settings. Indeed, Wintle (2016, p.1497) calls out the hegemony of Eurocentric aesthetics in exhibition making and how the imposition of these social ideals might impact the reading of objects from Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Museography, as theorised as a default for Western museums, mainly by European theorists, can alienate the artefacts and their meaning further. As Aimé Césaire declares, no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, intelligence, or force. The monopoly of Western aesthetics, epistemologies, and knowledge systems in museums could explain the complexity of the institution's integration of diverse stories and co-curating counterspaces, with the museum facilitating minorities to convey their stories entirely.

Another aspect that might influence museographical choices is the political situation of the host country. For example, Posocco (2021, p.4) found that in centralised states where the national coherence and power is not disturbed by diversity, A unitary idealist type of national museum emerges, typically displaying a long, coherent and all-inclusive narrative from the beginning of time until today, encompassing nature, archaeology, history, art and industry. The grouping of objects can also be impacted, favouring the display of objects based on geographical provenance or chronologically (Choi, 1999, p.2). Object presentation provides insight into the classificatory principles which aim to make collections more accessible. As Bal (1996, p.5) highlights objects, solidifies the exhibition's conceptualisation by the visitor as 'truthful' rather than a representation of the history it displays. They add to the legitimacy and authenticity of the museum's narrative.

Furthermore, the type of object on display can affect the representation visitors might be prompted to adhere to. Ethnographic museums have collections that reflect the collection methods of the time, selecting objects that appeared 'exotic' or could demonstrate the lifestyle of these populations. Indeed, as Shelton (2000, p.185) contends, objects are not 'static and mechanical embodiments of discrete meanings' but can be used as points of interpretation. If not interpreted and exposed to these practices and historically contextualised, the object risks emphasising the 'otherness' of the culture and conveying stereotypical beliefs about the contemporary social group.

2.3.3. Colour and lighting

Literature has explored the connection between colour and emotion since the 1950s. As stated previously, narratives can be transcribed through the design choices of an exhibition, and colours can play a significant role in this covert messaging by modifying the ambience and atmosphere. Literature suggests, for instance, that lighter colours are associated more with positive emotions and dark colours are associated more with negative emotions (Kaya and Epps, 2004). Using white to exhibit international collections could transmit a sense of universality, defined by Ferguson (2012) as the bourgeois, heterosexual, white male, who is considered the norm, defining the codes of Western aesthetics. This universal perspective assumes the role of sole narrator, transmitting an 'ideology-free objective' viewpoint. The White Cube effect creates a sense of timeless nowhere (Duncan & Wallach, as cited in Liuni, 2023, p.91), a non-contextualising environment, and an absence of space. It embodies 'neutrality, order and rationalism' (Rueda, 2020) and isn't ideologically transparent, having the power to influence our understanding and appreciation of artefacts (Filipovic, 2023). An environment with a grey colour tone can, for example, suggest monotony and formality, while green can symbolise concepts such as peace, tranquillity, and abundance (Salihoglu, 2022, p.224)

Lighting is also a device that impacts how objects are interpreted (Turpeinen, 2005). Research suggests that museum lighting is a protective means, enhances artefacts, guides visitors while creating visual interest in the context, and supports storytelling (Schielke, 2019). Lighting can define the atmosphere when viewing art, establishing a dramatic effect or its opposite, a certain muteness that can reinforce the textual narrative, creating affective cues, and shaping how knowledge is received. Emotional discomfort, for instance, can be created through overly dark lighting, narrow circulation paths, or visually dense displays. However, a uniformly lit environment can develop a sense of boredom because the light atmosphere feels monotonous (Lam, 1977). Lighting can also suggest a geographical region through artificial lighting, simulating naturalness, using cool or warm tones.

2.3.4 Conclusion

This literature review aimed to understand the impact of colonialism on the ethnographic museums of central Europe, explore the role of curatorial voices and political narratives that can interfere with the chosen displayed topic, as well as how museography frames through architecture, circulation, lighting and other display choices the narrative being represented. According to the body of research assessed for this literature review, ethnographic museums are intrinsically linked to colonial structures of power and coloniality of knowledge due to the institution's past. The discipline of ethnography, which refers to the study of cultures, was used in the past to justify colonising populations deemed primitive. Ethnographic museums were the structures that would present these findings and exhibit these groups' objects, serving as a tool for education, reinforcing social codes, and affirming Eurocentric world views. Although

contemporary institutions distance themselves from this legacy, the literature shows that these inherited epistemologies still linger.

Furthermore, the literature review shows that museum vehicles are viewed by different actors, such as curators, funders, and political pressures that different actors, such as curators, funders, and political pressures, frame. Museums that hold national collections act as potent mediators that shape collective memory and identity. With the increasing nationalism and rise of populist governments occurring in certain parts of Central and Eastern Europe, the government in power may heavily monitor national stories. Finally, the literature review stresses that museography plays a role in manifesting museum narratives. However, there was little scholarship for displaying African artefacts in Central European ethnographic museums. While some scholarship examines how design elements such as architecture, object placement, lighting, and colour impact visitor perception, there is little analysis of how these choices uphold or disrupt dominant epistemologies.

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the necessity of broadening conceptual frameworks within museum studies. A significant research gap exists regarding museographic approaches that can better interpret and centre African and minority objects through a fresh lens.

3. Methodology and Methods

3.1 Methodology

The methodology that has been selected is a qualitative comparative case study of three Central European ethnographic museums through triangulating the following data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, exhibition text document analysis, and an exhibition analysis examined through thematic comparative analysis. In this section, I will first detail my chosen approach, then explain my positionality, and describe the theoretical framework of this thesis, as well as justify the methods used to complete this research.

3.1.1 Methodological assumptions

Mason (2002, p.3) describes qualitative research as a tool to explore 'a wide array of dimensions of the social world'. The one that relates to this thesis is understanding 'the ways that social processes, institutions, and discourses work as well as the significance of the meanings that they generate' (Mason, 2002, p.3). Indeed, the core of this study is identifying the devices used in museums to foster the recognition of a distinct minority group and its heritage within their overarching narrative. According to Barroga & Matanguihan (2022), qualitative studies typically pose several questions beginning with 'how' or 'what'. This study will use the case study method to understand the place that African artefacts occupy in ethnographic museum narratives, which enables learning from experience rather than relying on purely theoretical material (Leymun et al., 2017, p.369). As this essay focuses on museography and exhibition text, case studies will enable an in-depth exploration of specific sites, formulating evidence-backed generalisations that apply to one case-by-case situation. This research will use case studies in a comparative analysis. Indeed, Knight et al. (2001, p.7040) explain that one case study limits the study's validity due to being bound to the context in which the data is collected. Multiple cases, however, improve the soundness of the argument made (Knight et al., 2001, p.7040).

3.1.2 Positionality statement

According to Rowe (2014), positionality is the stance the researcher takes vis-à-vis the social and political context of the study, the community, the organisation or the participant group mentioned. I, Elise Nguema, posit that a positionality statement is vital in the context of my research. Coming from a multi-ethnic background, foreign to the geographical context I explore in my thesis yet familiar with the subject matter studied, my stance as an outsider in this process needs to be clarified (Rowe, 2014, p.3). My ethnic background and cultural heritage inform a lot of my conceptions. For instance, being French, Gabonese

(from the Fang tribe) and English has allowed me to navigate different world perspectives and cultural frameworks. This has solidified the first of my world conceptions, relating closely to a post-pragmatist feminist and decolonial outlook (Denzin & Giardina, 2006, p.22): ‘ideas and conceptions are not neutral’; they are the product of one’s environment, upbringing, experiences and cultural background. As a mixed woman, I am aware of the in-between-ness of my position, embodying diversity or privilege, largely dependent on who I am situated with. For most of my upbringing, growing up between rural northern France and upper-middle-class southern England, I have been the only representation of diversity in the spaces navigated. This has developed an interest in those who, like me, do not neatly fit into societal standards.

I am a thematic insider in this research, acutely aware of the need for decoloniality (not only in words). Another significant part of my identity is that I am a Protestant. I derive from the teachings of Jesus a sense of social justice, advocating for minorities in society, challenging religious authority, supporting the rights of women and those with little means, and inviting all to be on an equal footing. I believe that each individual has their own relationship with God, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of individuality, freedom, belief or not and tolerance of difference. However, in this reflexive exercise, I have to acknowledge that my privilege largely stems from three major standpoints: my belonging to the middle class, allowing access to private education, a university in the United Kingdom, and a European master’s and significant cultural capital. I believe museums are tools for education, a better quality of life and social standing. I hold the privilege that holding three passports (one in the EU) offers, especially in the organisation of this thesis. As I hadn’t visited the countries studied in this thesis, I am unfamiliar with Austria, Hungary and Slovenia’s history, culture, and contemporary politics. This positions me as a geographical outsider. As a mixed master’s student, I cannot dissociate my increasingly more decolonial outlook on museums from the choice and completion of this thesis. This stance might not reflect the view and the positioning of the museums I will be studying and my understanding of the context and history of Central European museums. It also impacts my theoretical framework, the creation of the questionnaires and my interpretation of the data material.

3.2.3 Theoretical framework

Grant & Osanloo (2015, p.1) define a theoretical framework as the use of existing theory to explain a phenomenon through a particular lens (Luft et.al., 2022). I have chosen to use decolonial theory as my ‘fil rouge’, informing my positioning throughout my methods. The concept of decolonisation has been used in many disciplines, as Asadullah (2021, p.28) stipulates, its definition varies with an emphasis on the scale of its impact. In *Wretched of the Earth*, a seminal text for decolonial theory, Franz Fanon (as cited in Etherington, 2016, p.156) explains decolonisation as a process through which ‘the colonised liberate themselves politically and psychologically’. According to Anibal Quijano (2007, p.93), colonialism and

coloniality must be differentiated as related, yet separate, concepts. Colonialism refers to a pattern of domination and exploitation where the control of authority, production of resources, and work of a given population is held by a different identity. Coloniality, on the other hand, refers to a pattern of power between two peoples or nations, with one deciding how work, knowledge, authority, and relations are articulated with each other through several ideas, namely, the concept of race (Pachón Soto, 2023, p.5).

Decolonial theory acknowledges that academic tools and institutions of power and education have 'left little space for people of colour, vehiculating the voices of the powerful majority players instead' (Mutua & Swadener, 2004, p.3). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p.335-336) explains that this 'coloniality of knowledge', emerging during the Enlightenment period, argues that humanity is defined by rationality and the ability to understand the world, making the cultured 'European Man' the default. The 'Other', which was determined to be different from this standard, was examined by the 'Rational Man' to establish their humanity. As defined by Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p.4), 'decoloniality refers to the processes through which entities under domination stop subjecting themselves to the rules and hierarchies imposed by a coloniser and advocate for independence of knowledge and being. Several interrogations can be posited regarding applying this concept in this study. The first would interrogate the use of this theory in Central European countries that don't have a 'direct colonial' history with Africa. As further explained in the introduction and the literature review, although the Austro-Hungarian Empire didn't hold physical colonies, Sauer (2012, p.8) asserts that 'explorers' and colonial administrators sent to other European colonies were a covert form of domination exerted by said countries.

Furthermore, coloniality and Eurocentric beliefs regarding the way of viewing and displaying artefacts in museums don't require official colonies to adhere to the mindset. Eurocentric points of view, often articulated as universal truths, still shape African heritage representation and museum practices worldwide. As Eastern Europe lies in the crossings of inter-imperiality, coloniality has touched it in complex ways (Vilenica, 2023, p.42). Central European nations also find themselves on the periphery of Western Europe. This peripherisation creates a chain reaction with the countries aspiring to closeness with the West, distancing themselves from those even further away from the idea of modernity and Europeanness. Huigen et.al. (2018) assert that Central European countries found themselves in a dual position, administering and researching colonised countries while also being subjected to domination by imperial powers. To tackle this dual positionality, this research focuses on silences and absences in the narrative, rather than only what is present in the display. When considering the words of curator Ana Sladojević (Vilenica, 2023, p.11), '[n]o museum is anticolonial as such, or at least not yet', there is still time to address these concerns in Central Europe.

Decolonial theory enables me to critique how African artefacts are framed within national and European identity narratives. Indeed, as stated in the literature review, ethnographic museums historically held

'trophies of imperial conquest', reinforcing European dominance over African material culture (Karp, 1991, p.16). Decolonial theory also examines how power operates in these institutions, questioning who decides what is displayed, what these objects say, and whether the museum acknowledges the colonial links to their collections. It can also be used to decipher how museographical choices reinforce or challenge Eurocentric knowledge structures. Indeed, Mignolo and Vázquez (2013, as cited in Shutz, 2018, p.6) note that Western aesthetics have come to dominate all discussion of art and its value. They further posit that modern aesthetics are a form of sensory colonisation alongside other economic and political forms of control. In museums, this can look like the overuse of the white cube format explained in the literature review. The spacing for all references

Finally, Decolonial theory can evaluate the extent to which minority perspectives are included or excluded in these displays. For instance, Seitel (2001, p.6) asserts that minority objects can be subject to exoticisation and 'folklorisation', intriguing the viewer through the sensationalisation of the object or its maker. It can also reinforce the dominant culture by simplifying the minority's traditional material culture. Museums can reinforce national identity by limiting African representation to its colonial and pre-colonial past, rather than present identities (Mbembe, as cited in Tembo, 2018, p.2, p.4). This leads to a representation of the continent which lacks agency and is always determined by outside forces, reducing its inhabitants to passive bodies that can be exploited (Tembo, 2018, p.2).

Displays that place objects in a time capsule and do not engage with contemporary perspectives or art can send a similar message of stagnation and passivity. Decolonial theory can help us understand these hidden power structures that are reluctant to change their authorised voice.

3.2 Methods

When it comes to the data collection, I implemented these methods: exhibition analysis of each permanent exhibition examined through a thematic analysis, exhibition text document analysis for the panels in the exhibitions and semi-structured interviews with curators.

3.2.1 Exhibition analysis

The choice of exhibition analysis is motivated by analysing the museographical decisions made regarding African artefacts. Exhibition analysis is crucial in understanding how artefacts are framed in the museum's narrative. Leavy (2020, p.519) asserts that a 'detailed description and analysis of the visual, written, and technological exhibit elements is typically the starting point for data collection in museum research'. I conducted several independent visits and a guided tour of the permanent exhibition to structure my data

collection. The reasoning behind this decision was to thoroughly understand the available information and context surrounding the narrative, building the objects. A guided tour is a reliable way to access the authorised museum version of the story. Individual visits, on the other hand, helped me contrast the information individual visitors get access to compared to the more detailed explanation that usually comes with guided tours.

While visiting the exhibition, what I observe is subjective and will likely influence my interpretations of the museum's narrative choices. Olmos-Vega et.al. (2023, p.243) assert that 'a researcher's influence is not something to be neutralised, merely acknowledged, or explained away.' As a researcher and a first-time visitor, I find this analysis merits interest, giving insight into how exhibition design influences the interpretation of African artefacts. During the individual visits, I have used Leavy (2020, p.520-521), Olmos-Vega et.al. (2023, p.243) and Moser (2010, p.24-26) 's recommendations to collect data.

For each museum, I visited the exhibition space three times:

During the first visit with the curator (for the NM and the SEM), I took notes on themes evoked by the curator and aspects related to museographical choices, constraints experienced, and complementary information to the interview. I then returned to the exhibition space with a guided tour (NM, SEM and WWM), booked in advance. As these tours were private and the guides were aware of my special interest, the tours were tailored to me or the guide's specialisation area. To collect the data, I used a journal to annotate thoughts, paying attention to how the architecture relates historically and culturally to the display (Moser, 2010, p.24). I then observed lighting arrangements (artificial or natural), colour choices and display arrangements. I then went around the exhibition again to collect the textual and video evidence (photographing labels and recording video content). I paid more attention to signage, understanding the voice behind the written text (explicit vs implicit authorship) and the mention of sources. I only collected text that related to the African collections on display. For all museums, this meant choosing what section of the permanent exhibition to mention. Throughout this text, I refer to the artefacts as being 'African'. Although aware that this term is a generalisation and each country, ethnic group, and region has its specific and unique identity, for the purpose of this research, I count them as a monolith. This decision is made for clarity's sake, as I am observing broad trends between how artefacts that originate from Africa are presented within a different continent.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

The second method used is semi-structured interviews. Leavy (2020, p.525) claims that interviews have the potential to uncover 'the tacit assumptions, goals, and factors that shape and constrain the choices that museum practitioners make in creating exhibitions'. Due to some logistical complications, interviews

weren't collected for the WMW. Described by Flick (2002, p.132) as the most widespread form of interviews, this method is used in this study to supplement, if needed, the other two methods I arranged two interviews: one is with the Collection Manager of the African Collection in the NM, and the other is with the Collection Manager and Keeper of the African Collection for the SEM. The interview questionnaire comprised four main parts (Annexe B, p.81-82): Introduction questions help ascertain the background, interest, and experience of the professional interviewed. The following questions aim to demonstrate the narrative framing of African artefacts in a permanent exhibition. As none of the curators were responsible for the original showcases displayed, I asked a couple of display-related questions, collaborations and noticing change within their institution questions, which would help get insight on the institution's stance and the place they see for curatorial voice vs community voice.

I recorded each interview, as it facilitates the use of a conversational style and minimises information loss (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p.675). The process would then incur a transcription phase after completing the interview. I used the Word feature Transcribe to transcribe the recording to text accurately. I wasn't able to get an interview with the WMW due to their curator not being available.

3.2.3 Content analysis

For the last method, I collected the text displayed around African artefacts in the museums' permanent exhibitions mentioned above (explanatory labels and thematic room presentations, if present). Collecting this data would contribute to building a more refined picture of the authoritative voice available to the standard visitor, the collection of the materials involved taking photographs of the exhibition text and analysing its content.

Leavy (2020, p.552) defines content analysis as the study of inscriptions in published reports, newspapers, adverts, books, web pages, journals, and other forms of documentation. Content analysis aims to study the presence or relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts. Within exhibitions, labels and text are the most direct means of communication from the curator to the audience, making a museum exhibit without them unintelligible to the broader public (Karpiewska et.al, 2019, p.143). To grasp the full extent of the narrative portrayed by the museums studied regarding the African artefacts on display, the need to focus more specifically on the tangible, accessible content as well as the museographical aspect of the exhibition is necessary.

3.2.4 Data analysis

I used a comparative thematic analysis, conducted through Word, analysing the textual evidence and understanding how it matched up to the museographical and interview evidence. Braun & Clarke (2006, p.79) state thematic analysis is ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data’. The research questions in this study are comparative (for example: How do ethnographic museums in Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia construct narratives around African artefacts, and what role do minority perspectives play in these narratives?), drawing from different case studies, thus warranting the use of a comparative method. Guest, MacQueen & Namey (2012, p.10) suggest two overarching questions that I used for the comparison of the data: ‘Are some themes present in one data set but not another?’ and, ‘If a theme is present in data sets from both groups in an analysis, is the expression of that theme different between groups?’.

3.2.5 Statement of use of AI

In this thesis, the tools ‘Chat GPT’ and ‘Grammarly’ have been used in the following ways:

Structuring: According to Khalifa and Albadawy (2024), AI is a valuable tool in academic writing. ChatGPT has been used as a springboard to generate a coherent order for my data analysis. While I had already formed the ideas and written out a couple of drafts, I used ChatGPT to find a logical order. I then reworked the final based on the clearer understanding generated. No direct ChatGPT content has been used in this process, as it is contrary to the Glasgow University ethics practices.

Rewording and final edits: According to the Glasgow University AI guidelines (n.d), AI tools can be used as a ‘conversation partner’, reworking some writing to enhance clarity. In this instance, some sentences, due to their length or lack of clarity, have been input into ChatGPT to better understand how to structure the sentence for general comprehension. Once the sentences have been generated, they have been questioned, reworked and thoroughly edited. No directly edited content has been used in this assignment, as it is contrary to the University of Glasgow's ethics practices.

Grammar and spelling: Grammarly Pro has been used in the editing and proofreading steps of the assignment, ensuring better grammar and spelling in the overall document.

4. Data Analysis

This chapter lays the groundwork for comparing display strategies throughout three Central European ethnographic museums. The first section describes the architecture and exhibition spaces of the Néprajzi Múzeum in Budapest, Hungary; the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, Austria; and the Slovenian ethnographic museum in Ljubljana, Slovenia. As architecture plays a crucial role in signalling the museum's institutional identity and underlying ideologies (Farahat & Osman, 2018, p .69), the following account aims to provide the reader with a visual representation of the first hypothesis regarding the messaging used in each museum space. It will be followed with a description of the spaces used in this thematic analysis: 'In the Field' and 'Art and Ethnography' from the Néprajzi Múzeum (NM), 'In the Shadow of Colonialism' and the 'Benin and Ethiopia: Art, Power, and Resilience' exhibition in the Weltmuseum Wien (WMW), finishing with the 'Distant Worlds: the African Collection Space' in the Slovenian ethnographic museum (SEM). The data analysis will then focus on specific aspects of exhibition design, addressing the spatial layout choices and how thematic, geographical exhibition types and physical circulation frame visitor engagement with artefacts. By examining colour lighting, object placement, and grouping, this study aims to determine the importance of physical and conceptual separation that these arrangements subtly convey. The final part will then focus on the display panels, dissecting the tone of the museum, to whom it is addressing, and what perspectives are being conveyed. The data analysis will investigate where African voices are held in the exhibition. The final section will focus on the display panels, analysing the tone of the museum, its target audience, and the perspectives being presented. The data analysis will examine the role of African voices in the exhibition space, what is conveyed about the colonial past each country has inherited, and what is said about each country'.

4.1 Architecture and Structuring of the Exhibition Space

4.1.1. The Néprajzi Múzeum (NM)

The museum of Ethnography in Budapest (NM) stands out as an imposing grey building, curving out from the ground. This modern build, towering over a no-man's-land, appears as a geometric, futuristic, and contemporary structure (see Fig.1.)



Figure 1: Architecture of the ethnographic museum, NM (Designboom, 2022)

From its imposing size, the building conveys importance through its ‘serious’ colour palette (Salihoglu, 2022, p.224) and stature (Lambert, 2020), as well as its official institutional status (See Fig. 1). It sits atop a cleared military marching ground, reinforcing the national significance of its presence. Its roof, transformed into a green space, emphasises the community aspect of the institution (Stir, n.d.), bridging the museum and the city together through this shared meeting space. As it draws closer, the large-scale grey facade reveals various details, composed of 20 Hungarian and 20 international ethnographic motifs such as Venezuelan, Congolese, Cameroonian, Mongolian, Chinese, and Melanesian symbols (Stir, n.d.) (See Fig. 2). This symbolic architectural choice positions the museum not only as a national technological achievement (Neprajzi Muzeum, 2025) but also suggests an inclusive or federating institution for both the local and international communities.

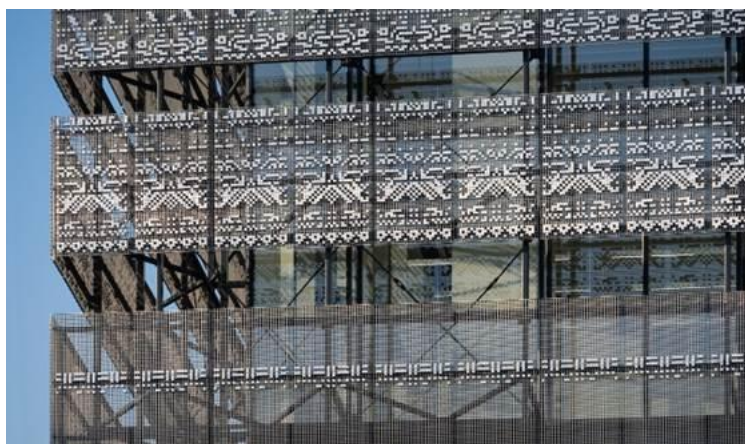


Figure 2: Detail of the Facade, museum of Ethnography, NM (IQD, 2022)

Upon entering the building, through low ceilings and revolving doors, visitors encounter a spacious hall coloured in various shades of grey (See Fig.3). The architecture emphasises minimalism and modernity, creating a high-end aesthetic. However, the predominantly white and grey colour scheme may also contribute to a sense of sterility or neutrality, implying the authoritative voice of the institution once again (Salihoglu, 2022, p.224). The museum's architecture, therefore, operates both as a national statement, gesturing towards global inclusivity, and as a display of its modernity and distance from the past.



Figure 3: Lobby of the museum of Ethnography, NM (Archdaily, 2022)

The recently unveiled permanent exhibition of the NM is divided into eight themes. It looks at different aspects that compose the museum experience, namely the journey that artefacts follow in the collection, the fieldwork which is carried out by the experts, the history of the museum and its inception, folk art and its impact, the relationship between art and ethnography, prehistoric research and the concept of heritage (See Fig. 4).

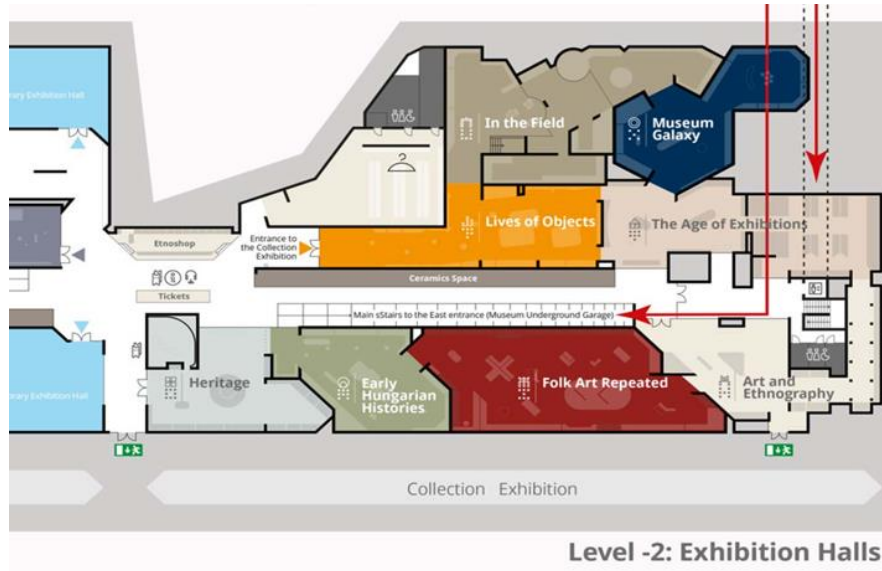


Figure 4: Map of the Permanent Exhibition of the museum of Ethnography, NM (Neprajzi Muzeum, n.d)

The following spaces were selected in this research due to their display of a large concentration of African artifacts:

The first space is the ‘In the Field’ exhibition space. With walls covered in dark grey, black, and white photos scattered throughout the room, this space highlights the various actors who contributed to the museum’s collection (See Fig. 5). The space features glass display cases for each collection, showcasing items from various geographical locations (See Fig.5). The room also specifies the different anthropological and ethnographical tools used and their progression through time (devices, methods, and mentalities).



Figure 5: ‘In the Field’ exhibition space, NM, (iF Design, 2025)

The second space is the ‘Art and Ethnography’ section, which starts in a long white corridor, resembling ‘a Chinese street’ with glass casings (NM guided tour notes, 2025). These displays present ‘artistic displays

of nameless objects' from different continents (See Fig.6). Composed of international objects, the corridor leads to a white, open space, questioning the links between artistic production and ethnography. These displays broach themes such as Orientalism, the non-European gaze, and the curators' bias.

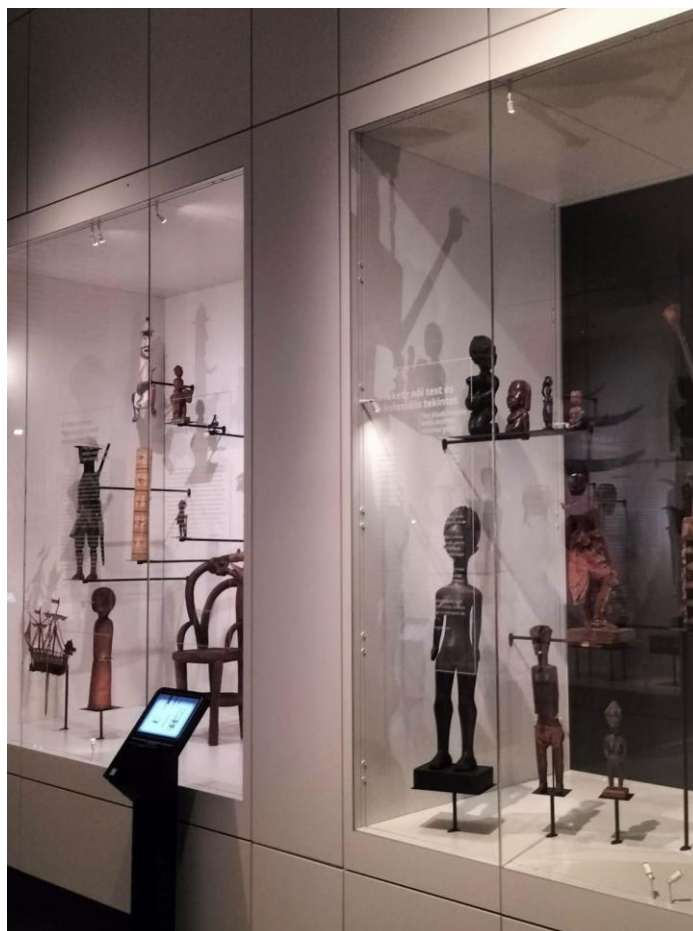


Figure 6: 'Art and Ethnography' exhibition space, NM (Nguema, 2025)

Although the 'Life of Objects' and the 'Museum Galaxy' spaces (in orange and blue on the map, See Fig.5) also display a few artefacts originating from the African continent, there are significantly fewer than in the latter rooms. The age of the exhibition space also has an installation recounting a scientific expedition in Tunisia (a country part of the African continent); nevertheless, for the interest of this paper, the focus will remain on Sub-Saharan African artefacts.

In conclusion, the selected rooms, 'In the Field' and 'Art and Ethnography,' offer the most relevant material for an analysis focused on the representation of sub-Saharan African artefacts within the museum of Ethnography in Budapest.

4.1.2. The Weltmuseum Wien (WMW)



Figure 7: Weltmuseum Wien facade, WMW (KHM-museumsverband, 2017)

Like many European museums, the architectural design of Weltmuseum Wien (WMW) evokes visual connections to imperial grandeur and accumulated wealth (Tschumi, 1981). The entrance, marked by towering marble columns and lavish gold ornamentation, reflects the institution's historical prestige (See Fig.7).

Unlike the ethnographic museum in Hungary, which chose to display its collection in a new building (See Fig.1), the WMW is housed in one of the wings of the former Habsburg imperial residence, located in the Neue Burg section of the Hofburg Palace (See Fig.7). The opulent, tall building, fitting all the architectural codes of a Neoclassical structure, features a marbled interior, laden with statues and covered by prominent pediments (See Fig.8).



Figure 8: Inside Architecture Weltmuseum Wien, WMW (KHM-museumsverband, 2017)

The museum does not shy away from its imperial past; in fact, little modification is made to the original space. This choice physically embodies a sort of historical continuity with the past. On the one hand, this

could be interpreted as the museum owning its past and aiming for full transparency without needing to announce its renewal through modern architecture or disguise reinterpretations under modernity. On the other hand, upon entering this building, one might wonder if the museum will create a rupture with old-school ethnography through different means. Ultimately, WMW sets the tone for a museum experience that either skilfully uses critical reflection or inscribes itself in the continuity of its predecessor, doing little to address the complex legacies.

The WMW's recently unveiled permanent exhibition is divided into fourteen galleries, featuring thematic contemporary interpretations. Characterised by a white cube-styled room addressing topical issues (colonisation and its aftermaths), and location-centric displays focusing on different continents, represented in black rooms. Upon entering the 'In the Shadow of Colonialism' space, a heavy door opens onto a room with wooden flooring and white walls; in the centre of the room, a digital display table with surrounding seating immediately captures the visitor's attention. (See Fig.9).



Figure 9: Exhibition Space 'In the Shadow of Colonialism', WMW (KHM-museumsverband, 2017)

The interactive screen presents archival documents and critical questions that expand on the notions displayed on the wall text and invite the visitor to deeper engagement (See Fig.9). One of the prominent features of the room is a large central wall displaying a map that outlines regions under European influence before decolonisation (See Fig.9). The panels surrounding this central display address these different topics: Colonial powers writing of history, museum acquisition, ethical practices in contemporary collecting, the role that Austria played within the European colonial system and the meaning of the words plundered, gifted, exchanged, stolen, bought or traded. This room features a substantial amount of text, digital, and video materials, with a few objects on display.



Figure 10: Exhibition space 'Benin and Ethiopia: Art, Power, Resilience', WMW (KHM-museumsverband, 2017)

The WMW has a second room that warrants study: 'Ethiopia: Art, Power, Resilience', which is the only room that focuses solely on the African continent. Through the brown doors, one is greeted with a map situating the ancient empires of Benin and Ethiopia, collated with videos of experts speaking on the topic at hand; the rest of the room harkens back to display techniques of the old ethnographic museum, with wall casings displaying a plethora of objects by region with detailed cartels (See Fig.10). The black outline of the glass frame, coupled with the black background and lighting, gives a solemn impression to the space filled with history. The famous Benin heads have pride of place in a giant casing of their own. Behind the statues, a contemporary area explores how contemporary Nigerian culture draws inspiration from the former Benin Empire in music and fashion.

4.1.3. The Slovenian ethnographic museum (SEM)

Much smaller in stature than the two previous museums in this comparison, the architecture of the Slovenian ethnographic museum (SEM) conveys a sense of openness and creativity, distinguishing it from the formal atmospheres of the larger museums mentioned earlier (See Fig.11). The use of glass on the façade brings a connection to the outside environment, allowing natural light to fill the interior and reinforcing the museum's accessible character (Gobbato, 2023, p.8) (See Fig.11). Additionally, the presence of colours and the variety of materials also give a more creative air to the space, inviting exploration (Moreira Pinto & Matos, 2024, p.116).



Figure 11: Facade of the Slovene ethnographic museum, SEM (Nguema, 2025)

In the centre of the hall, a sizable glass lift rises to the third floor, where the international collection is displayed. Ultimately, the SEM feels set apart not only because of its smaller scale but also because of its building design that does not demand spectacle. It seems to be made for community transparency and exchange. The permanent exhibition of SEM is organised by geographical area, with international collections displayed on the same floor (See Fig.12). The part that interests me is the ‘A Reflection of Distant Worlds’ section. Contrary to the previous two ethnographic museums, which have been renovated, the SEM’s permanent exhibition is in the process of being remodelled.



Figure 12: Map of the Permanent Exhibition, SEM (Nguema, 2025)

Initially designed in the 2000s, the space transforms into a narrow corridor that weaves through the various expeditions undertaken by Slovenes, starting with the exploration of America and then moving on to Africa (See Fig.13).



Figure 13: View of the African collection section in 'A Reflection of Distant Worlds', SEM (Nguema, 2025)

In this section, brown panels stand tall, either marked with sepia landscape pictures, tribal symbols, or varying-sized cabinets propped on a wooden board floor (See Fig.12). The African section is divided into two, one addressing the different regions within the continent, the other acting as a conclusion to the whole international section trail, which looks at all the collectors that partook in the creation of the museum's collection. Very few objects have been displayed in the section, and the labels contain very little information. The content is organised based on different regions of the continent (east, west, south).

4.1.4. Chapter Findings

Observing architectural and exhibition design elements in these three museums reveals how this component acts as a framing device through which the viewer engages with ethnographic collections. While the NM makes its modern interpretation and global inclusiveness explicit through its minimalist interior and façade motifs, the neutral palette used inside suggests a certain scientific neutrality, as well as an authoritative voice, which is translated through the imposing, sharp exterior. In contrast, the WMW embraces its imperial heritage by displaying its ethnographic collections in a neoclassical-style palace. Like the NM, the monumentality of the architecture communicates authority, knowledge and institutional grandeur. There appears to be a push and pull between continuity with the past, as displayed in the architecture, and the acknowledgement of colonial legacies, mediated by exhibition spaces such as 'In the Shadow of Colonialism'. Lastly, the SEM offers a more close-knit, community-oriented architecture, suggesting transparency due to the use of the glass in the facade.

4.2. Exhibition Design

The Exhibition Design chapter highlights the various display strategies employed by three Central European ethnographic museums. It addresses how spatial layout choices, as well as examining how thematic, geographical, and a mix of both typologies, impact the perception of African objects through physical circulation.

4.2.1 Spatial layout typology

This section compares the different types of exhibitions and their impact on the presentation of African collections. The NM's permanent exhibition is organised using a 'thematic approach, focusing on topics to convey information to the public' (Yang et.al., n.d., p.1). It is articulated around the processes of becoming and being an ethnographic museum institution. The thematic exhibition follows what Crang (2003, p.10) refers to as a narrative museum layout, where the visitor's path follows a 'fil rouge' story, in this case, 'the possibilities, the value, and the necessity of a museum' (NM curator interview, 2025).



Figure 14: View of the African collection displayed in the Emil Torday case, 'In the Field' exhibition, NM (Nguema, 2025)

Clifford (1988, p.229) highlights that thematic and narrative approaches to display can contribute to transparency, addressing historical, economic and political processes of production. Here, the NM exhibition foregrounds the hidden processes behind museum creation. However, as these institutions are rooted in Western knowledge systems, the institution should be transparent about how these systems have shaped and continue to shape what is collected, interpreted, and whose voice it relays. As an example, looking at the 'In the Field' space, explaining how fieldwork was and is conducted in ethnography, providing different examples of ethnographers and their schools of thought. One of these displays centres on Emil Torday, a Hungarian ethnographer who travelled and brought back objects from the Belgian Congo (See Fig.11). In this example, the choice of theme spotlights the collector, not the collection, rendering the objects displayed and the culture they herald from secondary, prioritising the perspective of the European

explorer (See Fig.14). This has the can have the effect of silencing the voices of the communities represented in the display. Although the exhibition aims to highlight how fieldwork changes through time, the lens they apply, focusing on Torday's point of view reinforces a Eurocentric framework. There is little attention is given to the objects themselves, the cultural group they originate from, limiting the opportunity for a more balanced and pluralistic interpretation. These objects are placed on a type of presenting table, mere collectables with little to no complementary information (See Fig.14).

Following a different format, the SEM's exhibition follows a geographical location-based approach. Rather than guiding the visitor through a string of ideas, the visitor is led from object to object, focusing on the people these objects originated from.

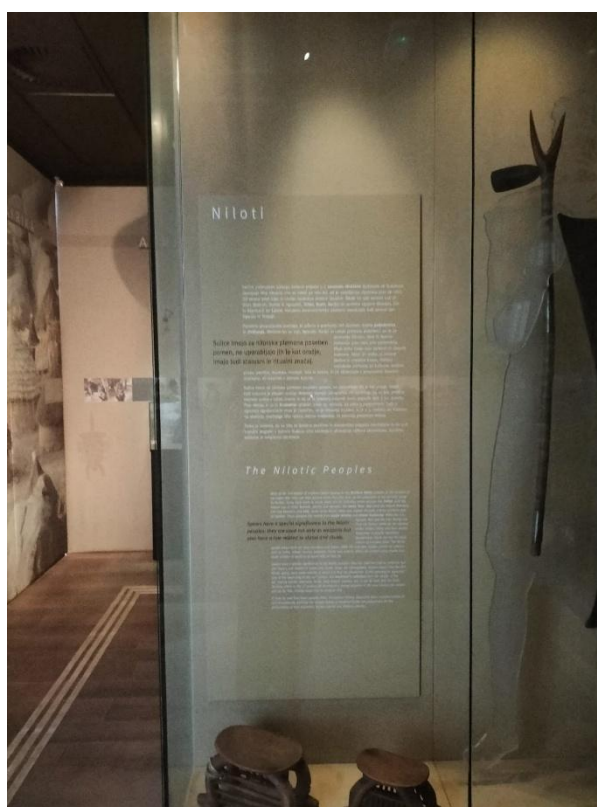


Figure 15: View of the African collection section, SEM (Nguema, 2025)

Some advantages of using a more situated exhibition layout, in terms of interpreting African artefacts, can be noted. On the one hand, it creates a specific space, enabling visitors to engage more directly with the cultural and material heritage of a particular region. However, this exhibition style also has its challenges. Recent findings in collection displays have shown that mixing artefacts (by nature, provenance, or function) creates new connections and ways of conceptualising the individual objects, rather than isolating them, providing a richer experience for the visitor (Spijksma & Lehmann, 2017). Geographically based exhibitions can also lead to clichés and generalisations in the visitor's interpretation of the artefact and

overall perception of the region of the world represented (See Fig.15). Rather than addressing commonalities, it sections the globe into areas to be compared.

As a midpoint between the NM and the SEM permanent exhibitions, the WMW combines geographical displays with narrative thematic sections. The tour guide explained the concept as ‘a string of pearls,’ recounting, on the one hand, the colonial legacy and history behind the collections exhibited, and on the other hand, geographically specific rooms focusing on countries (Guided Tour Notes WMW, 2025) (See Fig.17). Combining both previous methods enables the exploration of a broader range of topics. Indeed, the use of geographic sections centres each cultural group with its regional specificities, as well as addresses more complex issues in the thematic areas (See Fig.16).



Figure 16: Introductory Panel ‘Benin and Ethiopia: Art, Power, Resilience’ section, WMW (Nguema, 2025)

For instance, ‘Benin and Ethiopia: Art, Power, Resilience’ homes in on two specific African empires, including contemporary retellings and displays of these empires and showing their impact on Nigeria and Ethiopia’s cultural expression. Although it would have been interesting to see many different civilisations represented in this way, focusing on the two groups that are known for their resistance against colonisation sends a powerful message to the visitor. The tour guide did state that ‘some cultures are given more space to be discovered than others’ (Guided tour notes, 2025). This could be due to the availability of the collection and the themes on display. The section ‘In the Shadow of Colonialism’ balances out the specific outlook the geographical section provides, addressing the role the Habsburg Empire has played in the colonial machine and the role that museum institutions play in interpreting these objects. The objects as well as the narrative are centred throughout the display, with labels explaining each object and its use.

4.2.2. Circulation concepts

The NM's exhibition layout follows a relatively linear flow, which doesn't impose rigid directional paths on the museum visitors. Indeed, the visitor is allowed a degree of freedom around the space due to the absence of arrows or prescribed routes (Basu, 2006, p.86), encouraging them to retrace their steps or explore the layout at their own leisure. However, Choi (1999, p.9) notes that pathways can be suggested through the order of the textual panels, guiding the visitor through the museum's main storyline. In the case of the NM, this suggestion is loose, as the visitor can stop or skip panels without impacting the overall comprehension of the theme.

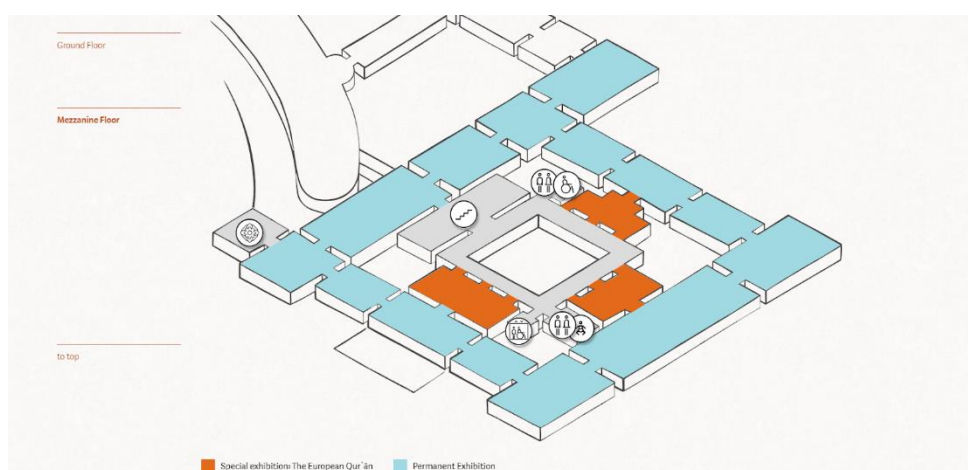


Figure 17: Map of the international collection permanent exhibition, WMW (Weltmuseum Wien, 2025)

A similar approach, albeit with a slightly more structured model, is employed in the WMW, utilising a circular pathway instead (See Fig.17). The guide described it as a pearl necklace, a succession of rooms forming a complete circle. Linear and circular pathways tend to be associated with a more strict and hierarchical information delivery style (Wineman & Peponis, 2010, p.86). In a linear model, there's a clear start and a clear finish with a structured narrative prescription. In the WMW, the circular model allows a little more flexibility, as one can start at different places in the circle (with entry points in each room), still prescribing a suggested route of exploration through its continuum aspect but with less structure, enabling the start and finish of the route to be different depending on the point of entry (See Fig. 17).

In contrast to the NM and WMW, the SEM adopts a more comprehensive approach to its international permanent collection. The museum-goer enters a narrow doorway and travels between geographical worlds using maze-like corridors (See Fig.18). The design encourages movement through long enclosed pathways, sparsely layered with objects.



Figure 18: View of the African collection section, SEM (Slovene ethnographic museum, 2025)

Paul Basu (2006, p.86) identifies two types of Maze pathways: the unicursal and the multicursal. The unicursal maze, in the case of the SEM's international permanent exhibition, features a single path that may twist and turn, but which entails no dead ends or choices between paths. Basu (2006, p.86) asserts that as the unicursal maze pursues a singular, predetermined route, visitors end up following a universal and authoritative curriculum, making this kind of pathway hierarchical in the way it spatially imparts information. In the SEM exhibition, the visitor progresses from the oldest acquisitions of the museum, which include Native American artefacts, through the African collection on display, and then concludes in a space that addresses ethnographers who contributed to the building of the collection. Duncan and Wallach (1978, p.37) claim that the order impresses on the visitor a feeling of triumph, a passage from darkness to light, and a sense of progression. The Labyrinth aspect of the display shapes the space into one that feels transitory and one not to pause in (See Fig.18).

4.2.3 Chapter Findings

Examining exhibition types, whether thematic, geographical, or a mix of both models, each offers interpretive possibilities and limitations when presenting African artefacts. Thematic approaches foster critical reflection on topics that surround the objects but require supplementation by more specific displays, such as geographically based displays, enabling a focus on regional heritage. Alone, this display type may reinforce a compartmentalised worldview rather than facilitate cultural connections. A combined version of these types can foster both historical accountability and cultural diversity, offering a more layered reading of the collections.

4.3. Colour and lighting

Across all five exhibition spaces, the predominant neutral hues establish the mood and interpretive tone of each area. This section examines how lighting and colour choices serve as crucial semiotic elements, subtly influencing perception, emotional reactions, and ideological framing.

4.3.1 The use of white and brightness



Figure 19: ‘Art and Ethnography’ section, NM (Nguema, 2025)

The design of ‘Art and Ethnography’ at the NM was thought to play a subversive role (Guided tour notes, 2025). Conceived as a take on the white gallery model, the space superimposed its traditional codes with critique through the exhibition text, aiming to enable visitors to use a critical lens while contemplating the art (See Fig.19). Initially, the subversion appeared to be effective, with progressive titles and a contrasting White Cube display technique (Rueda, 2020) (See Fig.22). Upon further reflexion, despite the aesthetic nature of the space, its subversiveness is subtle, with the white colour having a detaching effect on the objects. This feeling is described by Liuni (2023) as the modernist approach, which is seen as the use of whiteness to create a nowhere space (Duncan & Wallach, 1978). This then results in a loss of agency over the works of art, leading to a power imbalance where the seemingly neutral environment conceals the underlying political and ideological structures that produce the information the audience receives (Zeynep Damgacioglu, 2021, p.3).

Similarly to colour, lighting can also be used as a tool to shape visitor perception. Indeed, as Gobbato (2023, p.7) argues, the aim of lighting design is to ‘create immersive atmospheres, activating artworks, engaging

visitors, and even participating in mediation projects.’ Unfortunately, these ‘immersive spaces’ can, through the use of lighting, misrepresent the culture portrayed. Lighting can contribute to evoking and reinforcing ethnic, racial, or cultural stereotypes, thereby transmitting these harmful views to visitors. The Mask display in the SEM serves as a telling example of such mediation (See Fig.20).



Figure 20: View of the African collection section, SEM (Slovene ethnographic museum, 2025).

Indeed, one of the SEM curators seemed aware of the potential misrepresentations the exhibition might hold regarding the representation of African objects and their associated cultures (SEM curator interview, 2025). This is exemplified by her mention of the bright, single-beamed light, placed on the outside of each mask, slightly tilted upwards, creating a ‘horror movie-like effect’ (SEM curator interview, 2025), which exaggerates the eye socket and mouth proportions of the object (See Fig.20). Stressing the conscious choice of the previous design team, this decision aimed to emphasise the exoticness and scare factor of the Masks (SEM curator interview, 2025). This design aims to immerse the visitor in a different world through the objects and display choices. It highlights how the perception of others influences museum display practices.

4.3.2. Black, brown, grey and dark lighting

All five exhibition spaces prominently feature a contrast between bright and dark colours, possibly influencing lighting choices. The shift from brightly lit, minimally decorated rooms to dimly lit, ethnographically themed displays is significant because it mimics the journey from darkness to enlightenment (Duncan & Wallach, 1978, p.37). It is not just a change in visuals, but a transition between different ways of thinking and understanding: one room connotes reflection, critique, and objective thought. At the same time, the other evokes the obscure and unknown.



Figure 21 & 22: View of the ‘Black Female Body’ case from inside the corner / View of the ‘Black Female Body’ case from the exterior, NM (Nguema, 2025)

In the NM, for instance, there is an occulted part of the section in the ‘Art and Ethnography’ section dealing with the representation of Black women’s bodies in ethnographic pictures in an all-Black room (See Fig.22). This contrast could render invisible the subject brought up in this area, rendering it harder to access and setting it apart from the cohesive white-walled rest of the exhibition space.



Figure 23: ‘Benin and Ethiopia’ exhibition, transition between darker area to lighter, the contemporary take on two empires, WMW (KHM-museumsverband, 2017)

When it comes to the WMW, the rooms that display the geographical region collections are predominantly characterised by dark brown, black, and grey colours (See Fig.23). Accompanying these darker colours, the

lighting in these three spaces is dim and subdued, creating a space that feels enclosed and atmospheric. One does need to consider that for some artefacts to be displayed, dim lights are required to preserve the object and avoid its damage. These decisions may factor into the choice of lighting. Yet the transition, which visitors make as they move from brightly lit, minimally adorned rooms into the dimmer ethnographic displays, is not anodyne (See Fig.23). They are not just transitioning between objects but between epistemological regimes. One room invites objective reflection, analysis, and critique; the other, awe and admiration.

Finally, the SEM, while using similar lighting, makes a distinct curatorial choice by incorporating a deep shade of brown, a colour often associated with the field of ethnography, throughout the Africa exhibition (See Fig.24).



Figure 24: Distant World exhibition, wall and case detail, SEM (Slovene ethnographic museum, 2025)

As Hu et.al. (2024) stipulate, certain colours suggest specific atmospheres and temporal references. These colours can usually be associated with geographical areas: brown for Africa, yellow for the Sahara, and green for the Amazonian Forest (Caivano, 1998). Although the literature on the symbolic use of the brown and the African continent is rather sparse, in his book *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor (2010) describes the use of shades of brown to represent what is earthy and primitive. This design choice could be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it emphasises the colours and natural materials found in the objects exhibited. On the other hand, the use of ethnographic brown reinforces stereotypical imagery associated with the continent, flattening the diversity of cultures represented in the exhibition (See Fig.24).

4.3.3. Chapter Findings

The use of white, black, grey and brown can be interpreted through what Cheng (2008, p.3-4) identifies as the moral connotations of colour: using colour to infer narrative or feeling. The less colourful a space, the more it is presumed to carry intellectual weight. These connotations are emphasised by the type of lighting used in the space (Salihoglu, 2022, p.224).

Operating as a narrative device, they reinforce the reading of the artefact display in it. Duncan and Wallach (1998, p.37) describe the classical narrative function of museums as ‘a movement from chaos to clarity, darkness to enlightenment’. These can be demonstrated physically through the use of black and white, implying tradition, obscurity, or primitiveness as opposed to neutrality. Following this line of thinking, white becomes the colour associated with Western epistemologies, while darker tones represent ‘the Other’. Rather than neutral containers, these palettes can shape the visitor’s reception of the collections, cementing the museum’s messaging and potentially perpetrating systems of meaning and power.

4.4. Object Display Strategies

This chapter analyses and compares how the NM, the WMW and the SEM exhibit African artefacts. As outlined in the previous chapter, the choice of colour and lighting influences how objects are perceived in displays. The interplay between darkness and illumination also affects are discussed in this chapter, as lighting can be used as a strategy for object presentation. This chapter aims to explore the importance of object placement in the narrative crafting process. Indeed, grouping or exclusion of artefacts can perpetuate in a subtle way historical power imbalances and shape how visitors interpret and value different cultures.

4.4.1. Regrouping

All three museums group their African artefacts for presentation. In the case of the NM, few African artefacts are outside the ‘Art and Ethnography’ and ‘In the Field’ sections. When examining the SEM and the WMW, both spaces featuring African objects can be found on the top floor, in a peripheral area of the museum. While there is a larger number of objects from national collections in the museum's collection than from international ones, explaining the numeric difference, it does not address the regrouping of most international artefacts in a single section. This display choice can have a detrimental effect on their interpretation. As Mieke Bal (1992, p.561) states, the order in which the exhibits and panels are viewed and read is essential, implying a hierarchy in what the visitor is invited to consider. As the international display is the last accessed place, museum-goers who have followed the path, working their way up the museum, have access to the collections that might be different from if the collection was ‘mixed’ in or displayed on the first floor.



Figure 25: View of the mask installation, NM (Nguema, 2025)

This marginalisation could result in the diminished interpretative understanding of African collections and reinforce a separating colonial logic, grouping the non-Western, the foreign, and the historically colonised into confined areas. Ultimately, regrouping international artefacts, especially African ones, into remote sections reproduces institutional hierarchies of value.

4.4.2. Showing off, showing and invisible

Bal affirms that there is a difference between museums ‘showing off’ their artefacts and ‘showing’, contingent on the fact that the former ‘refrains from telling its own story’, lacking reflexivity on acquisition methods (Bal, 1992, p.594). In the case of the geographical rooms in the WMW, such as the Ethiopian and Benin displays, objects are displayed in traditional ethnographic display cases, accompanied with text providing information about the different artefacts. MacDonald (2023) critiques the ethnographic case display, often leaving visitors with a sense of amassed clutter, highlighting the scale of European collecting rather than the nations from which the artefacts originate. (See Fig.26 & 23). As per Bal’s theory, the WMW applies both ‘showing’ and ‘showing off’ aspects to its display, with information available contextualising each object corresponding to a ‘showing’ exhibit and the ethnographic case, the sheer

number of objects on display as well as the lack of reflexivity about acquisition, a more ‘showing off’ approach .



Figure 26: Benin and Ethiopia exhibition, Benin bronzes display, WMW (KHM-museumsverband, 2017)

In the NM displays (‘In the Field’ and ‘Art and Ethnography’), unknown objects with little contextual information are either displayed in a white-walled, shop-like corridor reminiscent of a street market (NM guided tour notes, 2025) or in front of a photo of the ethnographer who collected them in as a background. In the NM displays, a lot of objects are displayed in one case, providing less focus on the individual object stories and rather a focus on the amount of objects collected. In Bal’s terms, these can qualify as the museum ‘showing off’ the object, as they don’t stand alone; rather, the focus is on either the museum institution that is currently presenting it or the person that collected it, leaving little exploration of the actual object. Although the SEM’s display doesn’t showcase a significant portion of its collection and utilises glass casings instead of ethnographic cases, which would correspond to a ‘showing’ approach, little reflexivity is offered concerning the acquisition of the objects on display. While the intent to ‘show off’ does not give prominence to the items, there is an example in the NM where the choices made in the display obscure the objects from the public view. This instance occurs in the ‘Black Female Body’ section located at the end of the long white corridor, in the ‘Art and Ethnography’ section adjacent to the ‘Colonial Gaze’ section. This space is situated in a dark, poorly lit corner (See Fig.29).

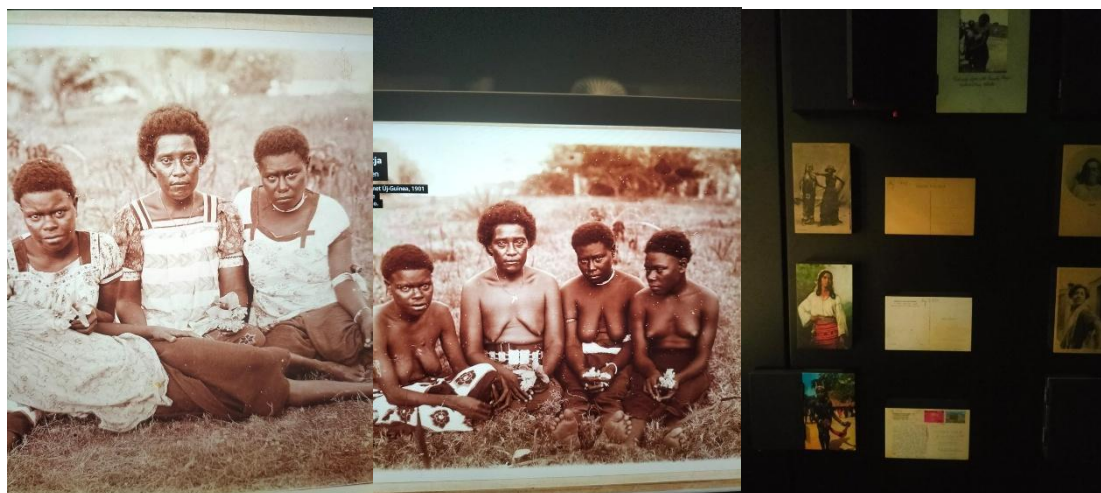


Figure 27, 28 & 29: Examples of ethnographic photos displayed in the 'Black Female Body' section, example of the brightness level, NM (Nguema, 2025)

In this space, feature flip over images of African women, clothed and unclothed, addressing the performativity of ethnographic pictures and the sexualisation of African women's bodies (See Fig.27 & 28) as the display is situated behind an exhibition case, covered in black, deviating from the visitor's path, next to an exit, not signposted, with nothing prompting a museum-goer to look at this section (See Fig 21 & 22). One explanation for the occulting of this section could be the sensitive nature (nudity) of the pictures displayed on the wall. Indeed, Susan Sontag (2004) asserts that sensitive images, whether by their shocking or violent nature, as part of an exhibition, could be interpreted in a gratuitous, even pornographic manner by the objectifying nature of spectatorship (p.75-77). However, there are no other hidden spaces in any other parts of the permanent exhibition. Turpeinen (2006) explains that the role of design in museums should be to reveal, not conceal, the content. In this case, the design choices of this section do not fulfil these roles. Ultimately, the invisibility of some parts of the NM African artefacts raises critical questions about the stories that are prioritised within the museum narrative.

4.4.3 Chapter Findings

I observed that the arrangement of African collections in isolated sections at the edges of museum layouts reinforces colonial ideas of otherness and cultural separation. The visibility and reflexivity in object presentation demonstrate how design choices can either challenge or uphold dominant narratives. For example, decontextualised artefacts are often prominently displayed, whereas sensitive exhibits, such as the 'Black Female Bodies' section in the NM, can be almost invisible. These curatorial strategies shape which stories are highlighted and which remain hidden, emphasising the need for critical reflection on how African heritage is represented in European museums.

4.5. Textual Display Strategies

This chapter highlights the textual strategies employed by the NM, WMW, and SEM to represent their African collections and historical narratives. Indeed, museums do not only inform with their text but also shape the visitor's understanding of complex and sensitive topics, specifically those tied to colonial histories. By understanding the use of questions, curatorial tone, the framing of historical involvement, and the establishment of authority through language, this section reveals how each institution positions itself in relation to its past.

4.5.1. The museum's positioning

4.5.1.1 Use of questions

Questions are devices used in an exhibition to direct the visitor's focus and encourage continued reflection (Hohenstein & Tran, 2007, p.24). Each museum using this device directs different topics to the visitor's attention, revealing more about the museum's position.

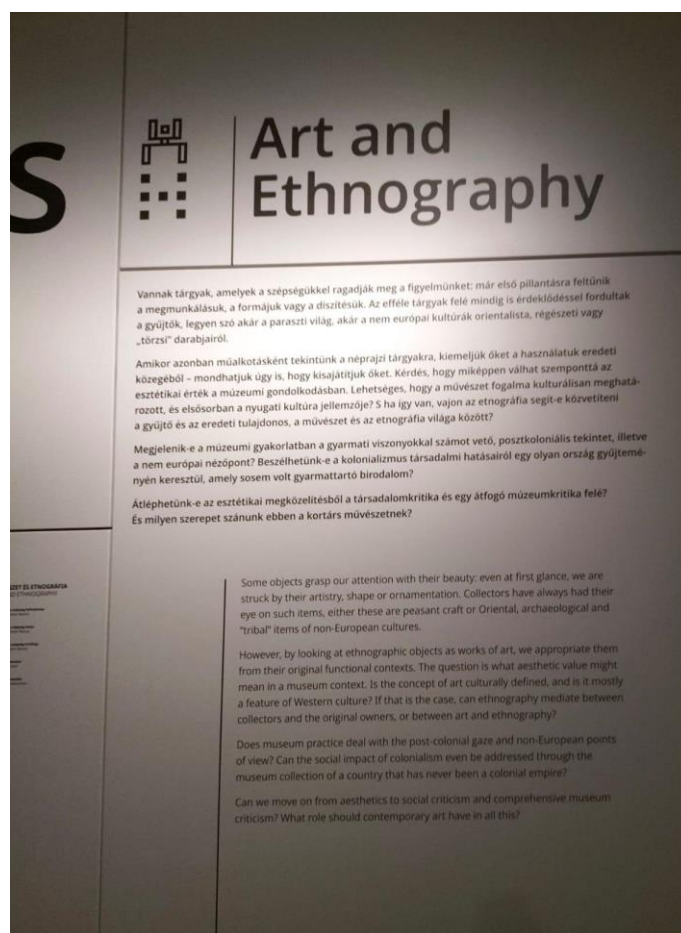


Figure 30: Art and Ethnography section, Text of the ‘Curator’s Gaze’ section, NM (Nguema, 2025)

For instance, in the NM's 'Art and Ethnography', questions are used as devices to interrogate the visitor's views on aesthetics, art and ethnography. However, the structure of these questions risks implying some confusing statements. Take the first question as an example in the curator text (section 'Art and Ethnography'): 'Is the concept of art culturally defined, and is it mostly a feature of Western culture?' (See Fig.30) There is ambiguity in the way the sentence is constructed, hinting at a specific answer. The first part of the sentence prompts the visitor to ask if the concept of art is culturally defined. When answering this question, I am inclined to answer yes. However, when looking at the second part of the question, which asks if art is mostly a feature of Western culture, I would answer no. as both questions are linked through the 'and', the visitor can feel prompted to answer yes to both parts of the question. Through the association of both questions, the curatorial text seems to implicitly signal that Western cultures are the originators of art, reinforcing an implied hierarchy in types of art, in who decides what is art and in who gets to control its presentation (Wintle, 2016, p.1497).

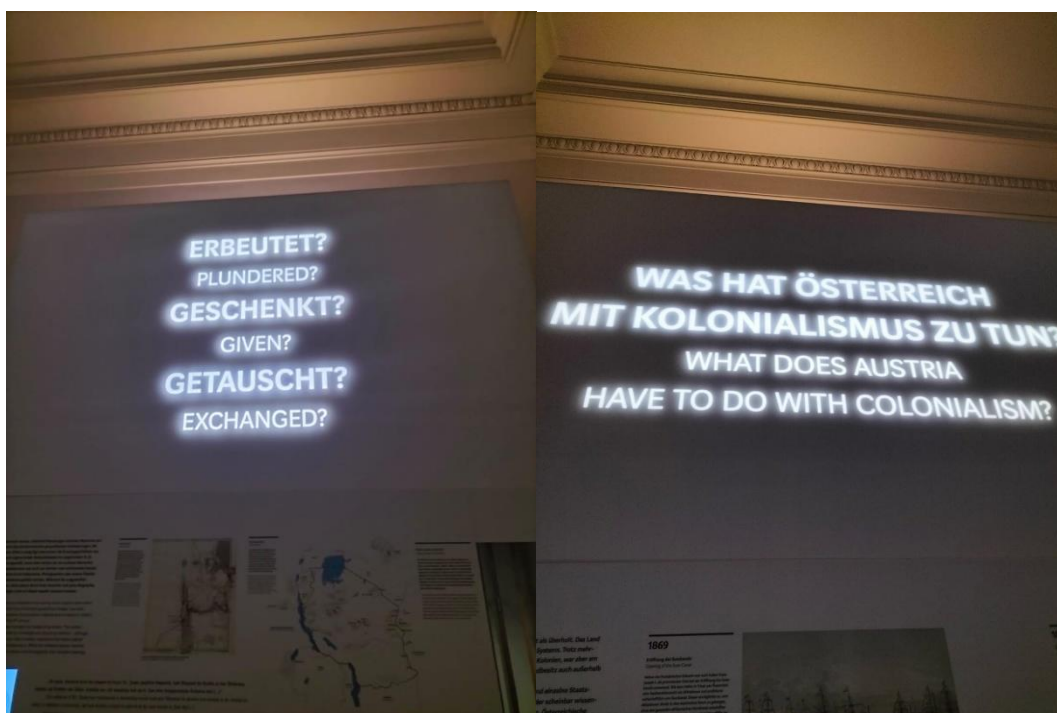


Figure 31: 'In the Shadow of Colonialism', Titles for 2 panels, WMW (Nguema, 2025)

The WMW also uses questions, but as subsection dividers. These titles inform the viewer of the topic discussed, prompting the visitor to reflect before reading the museum's narrative (See Fig. 31). The questions are simple and deliberately general, making them accessible to a broad audience (example: 'What does Austria have to do with colonialism?').

4.5.1.2 Museum tone: Neutral, ethnographic or accountable?

The tone of the museum plays a critical role in shaping visitors' interpretation, especially with collections tied to colonial histories. In all three museums, the tones used in the display text have clear differences, which in turn impact the way African objects are framed. Using, for example, a tone that avoids responsibility for the museum's past might result in vague or neutral labelling, minimal historical context, or the aestheticisation of artefacts. Tonal choices reflect how much each institution is willing to confront, acknowledge, or distance itself from sensitive topics such as race, colonisation, and inclusion (Torquato, C. et.al., 2024, p.112-113).

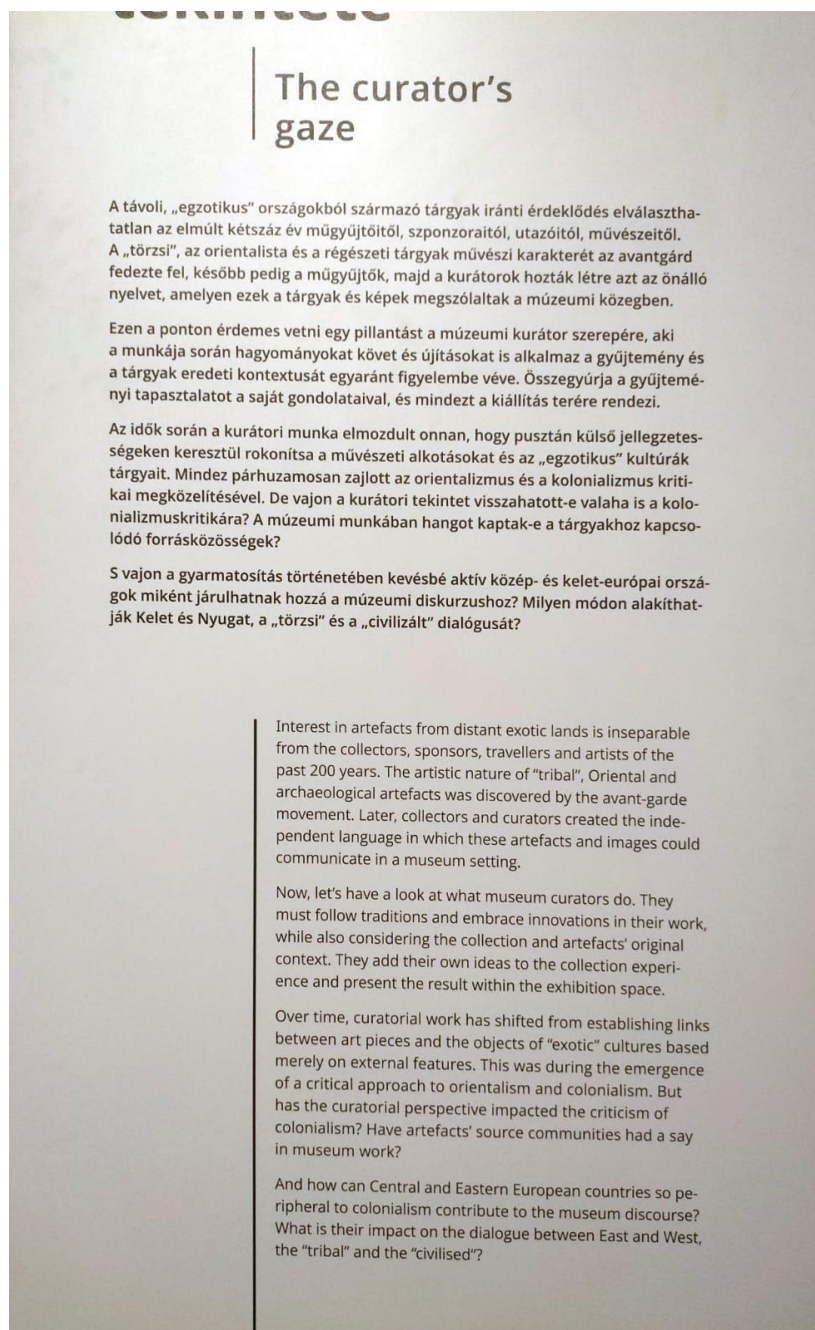


Figure 32: Art and Ethnography – Text of the Curator's gaze section, NM (Nguema, 2025)

At the NM, the curatorial tone appears hesitant. For instance, in ‘Art and Ethnography’, the curator text asks: ‘Can the social impact of colonialism even be addressed through the museum collection of a country that has never been a colonial empire? Can we move on from aesthetics to social criticism and comprehensive museum criticism?’ (See Fig.32) The use of ‘CAN’ implies the option of impossibility. Using ‘HOW’ shifts the display from doubting the concepts brought forward, instead prompting the visitor to think of solutions to address these issues. Rather than committing to critical engagement, the NM text shows a reluctance to take a stance on the complex histories embedded within the ethnographic collections. The position of the curatorial voice isn't confirmed by an answer to these questions, making one unsure about the messaging behind the tools used in this display.



Figure 33: Quote in ‘Distant Worlds’, African collection, SEM (Nguema, 2025)

Using a different tonal approach, the SEM adopts a more traditional perspective rooted in ethnographic conventions. The text is univocal and presents an outsider's look, a Eurocentric narrative with little space for the voices of source communities (See Fig.41). Although there are some attempts at critical reflection, such as the quote ‘the more limited the white man, the more limited the African seems to him’ (See Fig.33), they offer little context and function more as symbolic gestures than catalysts for meaningful reflection. The WMW, however, set itself apart by adopting an accountable and self-critical tone.

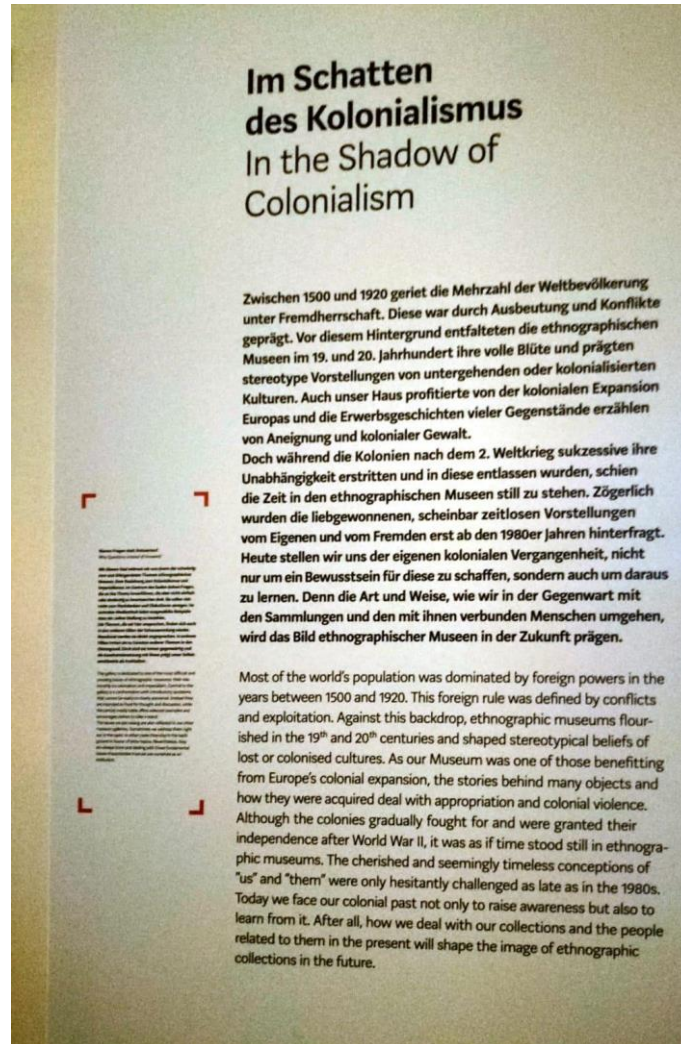


Figure 34: 'In the Shadow of Colonialism', Introductory section, WMW (Nguema, 2025)

The 'In the Shadow of Colonialism' section at the WMW openly confronts the museums' complicity, addressing colonial violence, plunder and theft, linking them directly to Austrian history (See Fig.31). The introductory paragraph acknowledges the power struggle, the injustice and the loss that defines colonialism. It centres the role of museums and specifically this institution (See Fig.34). Rather than distancing the narrative, the curatorial voice is reflective and engaged, inviting the visitor to critically think about the past and present museum practice. 'In the Ethiopia and Benin' section, the WMW chose two powers that faced colonial empires, emphasising their strength and celebrating their impact in a contemporary section.

4.5.1.3. The local audience vs international visitors

Throughout the various exhibitions, the formulation of the curator text not only reveals the narratives that the curators construct but also uncovers its target audience. Ethnographic museums have a historical nation-building vocation, making the decision to write for a local or international audience a conscious choice. It also reveals whose history is being told.

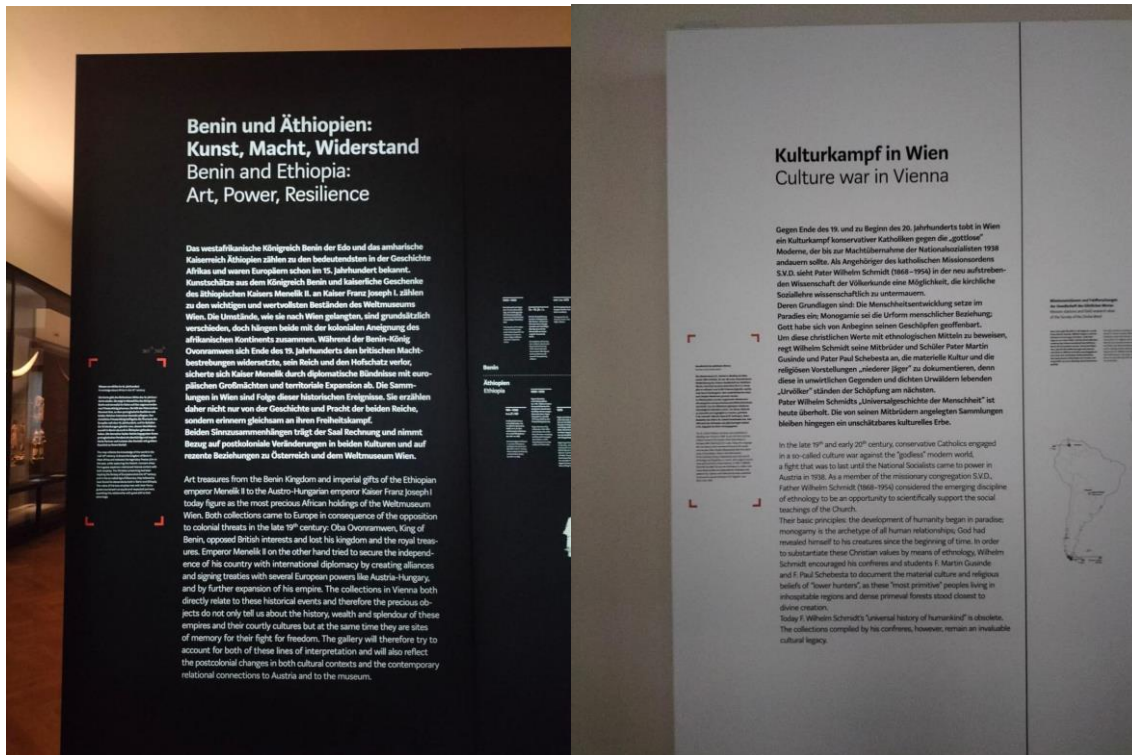
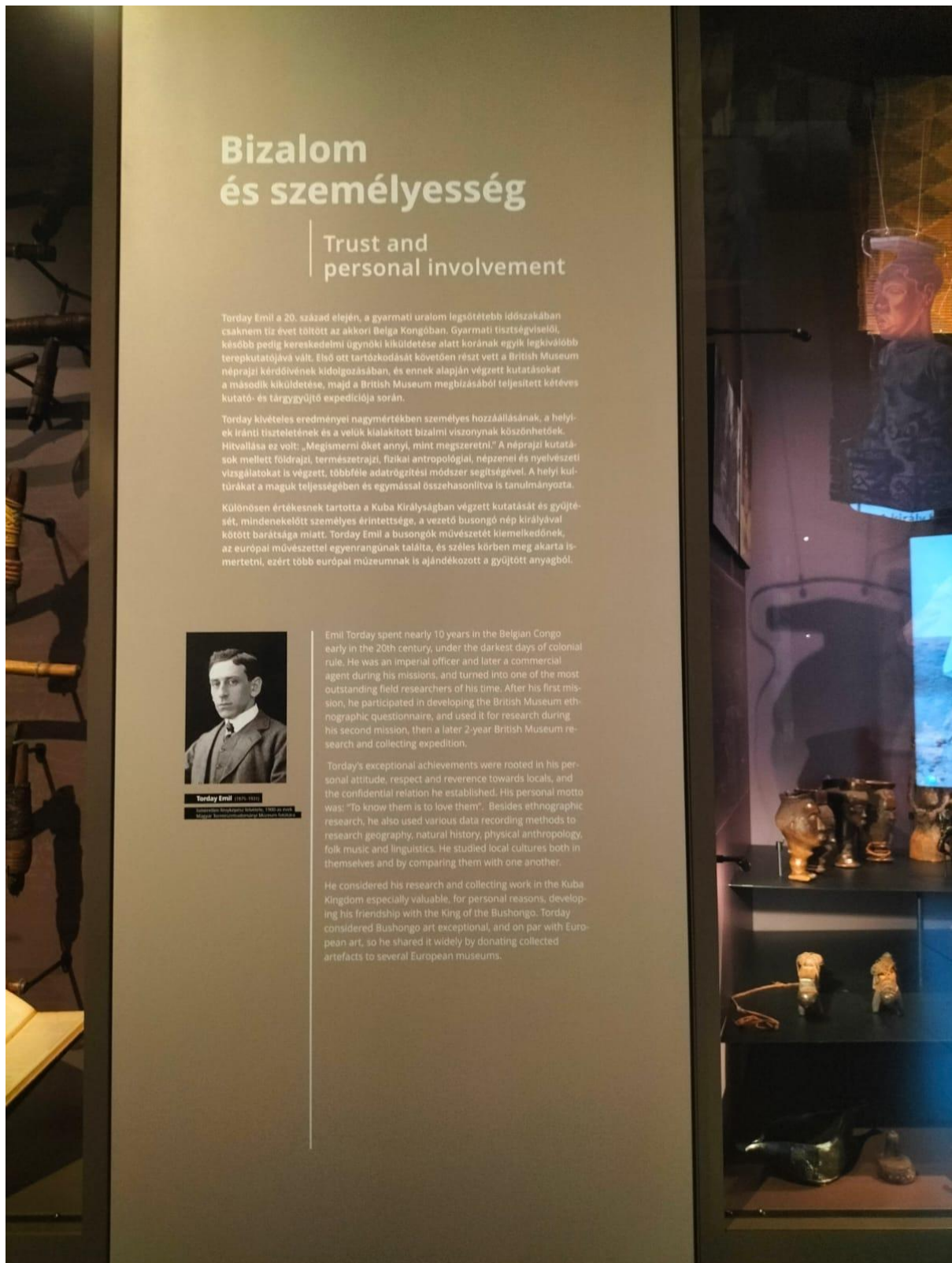


Figure 35 & 36: Texts of the ‘Benin and Ethiopia Art, Power, Resilience’ section and the ‘In the Shadow of Colonialism’ WMW (Nguema, 2025)

Amongst the three museums, the WMW more explicitly positions itself towards an international audience. Indeed, the exhibition features bilingual signage that gives English and German equal footing. This decision makes the curatorial text accessible to a more diverse audience. It also frames Austria's ethnographic legacy as a globally engaged narrative, one that doesn't stop at national borders (See Fig.36). For instance, in the ‘Shadow of Colonialism’ section, the text points out European colonial systems by using relevant examples throughout Austria's history, highlighting their participation in colonial knowledge systems. The WMW status can justify this choice, as it is a popular international museum hosting notable international collections. In contrast to the WMW internationalist tone, the NM presents a more ambivalent textual strategy, oscillating between a global mode of address and an implicit orientation towards a nationalist audience. The textual tone throughout the permanent exhibitions is characterised by neutrality, which operates as a political device (See Fig.37).



Bizalom és személyesség

Trust and personal involvement

Torday Emil a 20. század elején, a gyarmati uralom legrövidebb időszakában csaknem tíz évet töltött az akkori Belga Kongóban. Gyarmati tisztségviselő, később pedig kereskedelmi ügynöki kiküldetése alatt korának egyik legkiválóbb terepkutatójává vált. Első ott tartózkodását követően részt vett a British Museum néprajzi kérdőívének kidolgozásában, és ennek alapján végzett kutatásokat a második kiküldetése, majd a British Museum megbízásából teljesített kétéves kutató- és tárggyűjtő expedíciója során.

Torday kivételes eredményei nagymértékben személyes hozzáállásának, a helyiek iránti tiszteletének és a velük kialakított bizalmi viszonyoknak köszönhetőek. Hitvallása ez volt: „Megismerni őket annyi, mint megszeretni.” A néprajzi kutatások mellett földrajzi, természetrajzi, fizikai antropológiai, népzenei és nyelvészeti vizsgálatokat is végzett, többféle adattörzsi módszer segítségével. A helyi kultúrákat a maguk teljességében és egymással összehasonlítva tanulmányozta.

Különösen értékesnek tartotta a Kuba Királyságban végzett kutatását és gyűjtését, mindenekelőtt személyes érintettsége, a vezető busongó nép királyával kötött barátsága miatt. Torday Emil a busongók művészetét kiemelkedőnek, az európai művészettel egyenrangúnak találta, és széles körben meg akarta ismertetni, ezért több európai múzeumnak is ajándékozott a gyűjtött anyagból.



Torday Emil (1875-1952)
 Magyarországi Királyság, Kuba, 1905. évi első
 expedíció, Magyarországi Királyság, Kuba, 1905.

Emil Torday spent nearly 10 years in the Belgian Congo early in the 20th century, under the darkest days of colonial rule. He was an imperial officer and later a commercial agent during his missions, and turned into one of the most outstanding field researchers of his time. After his first mission, he participated in developing the British Museum ethnographic questionnaire, and used it for research during his second mission, then a later 2-year British Museum research and collecting expedition.

Torday's exceptional achievements were rooted in his personal attitude, respect and reverence towards locals, and the confidential relation he established. His personal motto was: "To know them is to love them". Besides ethnographic research, he also used various data recording methods to research geography, natural history, physical anthropology, folk music and linguistics. He studied local cultures both in themselves and by comparing them with one another.

He considered his research and collecting work in the Kuba Kingdom especially valuable, for personal reasons, developing his friendship with the King of the Bushongo. Torday considered Bushongo art exceptional, and on par with European art, so he shared it widely by donating collected artefacts to several European museums.

Figure 37: 'In the Field' section, Text 'Emil Torday', NM (Nguema, 2025)

Projecting progressive language, the text presents a more guarded voice, one that avoids confronting Hungary's historical complicity in colonial systems. The text tends to revert to ambiguous phrases, using language that appears non-committal (See Fig.37). Additionally, the exhibition, in some parts, seems to construct a national narrative that emphasises the country's peripheral innocence. The text addressing Emil Torday exemplifies this (See Fig.37): the museum claims his achievements as a pioneer in ethnographic

research yet dilutes his role as a commercial agent for the Belgian Empire, shaping a palatable image without acknowledging the consequences of his work abroad. The emphasis on Hungary not owning a colonial empire resonates in the text by using an outside perspective on colonial matters and treating Europe's colonial spree as a separate, historically detached entity. Although it is true that Hungary didn't possess a tangible colonial empire, its involvement in scientific expeditions, role as administrators in other colonial empires, and hosting of human zoos (Sauer, 2012, p.7; Czarnecka, 2020, p.287) warrant an examination of its perspectives. Additionally, although the subheading text is translated into English, many sections require the use of a QR code for access (See Fig.40). While this is an interesting design choice, highlighting the Hungarian language further cements the idea of national identity as its primary focus.

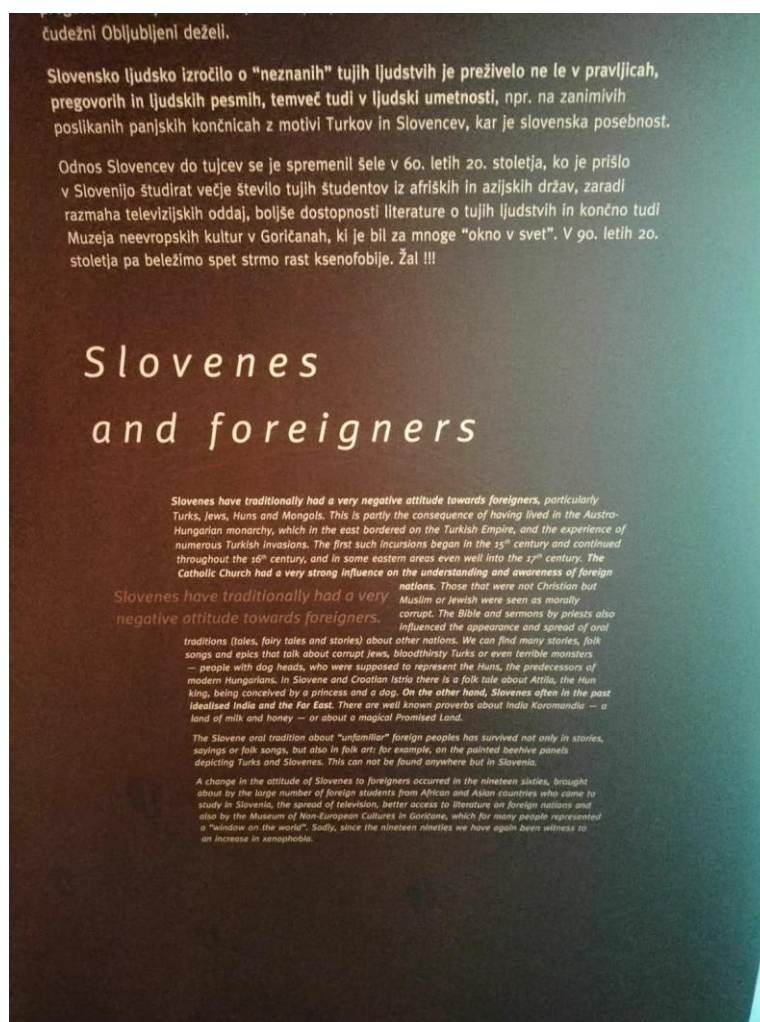


Figure 38: 'Distant Worlds' African collection, SEM (Nguema, 2025)

The SEM exhibition text also reveals a distinct national, local focus rather than a transnational engagement. Although the text in 'the distant worlds' section nods at Slovenia's exposure to different cultures, especially following the arrival of Asian and African students in the 1960s, it fails to engage with the broader history of colonial representation, missionary activity or ethnographic stereotyping (See Fig.38). Instead, the curatorial voice projects Slovenians as passive recipients of empire rather than balancing its outlook. The exhibition text doesn't touch on complicity while emphasising, similarly to the

NM, it positions itself as subservient in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Some quotes seem to gesture towards inclusivity but feel more tokenistic than structural, provoking mild reflection without disturbing dominant self-perceptions (See Fig.33).

4.5.3 The Choice of words and punctuation

In exhibitions, language not only describes, it frames and governs perception. Words and punctuation are used to describe objects that carry significant weight, functioning as interpretive tools as well as ideological markers (Modest et.al, 2017). Across all three museums, a specific device is used to mark potentially problematic terminology: the scare quote, a quotation mark that is mostly used to indicate irony, distance, or borrowed vocabulary. This punctuation offers a way to reference outdated or offensive terms without endorsing them. However, the effectiveness of this distancing mechanism depends on the clarity and consistency of the context. In the NM, for instance, the terms ‘tribal, primitive and exotic’ appear in several textual panels, often in quotation marks but without further precision on why these terms are not to be used as such (See Fig.32). The absence of explanation renders the inclusion of quotations hollow or risks legitimising the terms by reproducing them without critique. In addition, further ambiguity arises as the text doesn’t clarify whether the terms represent the museum’s viewpoint, the terminology, or the historical collectors’ wording. This detachment allows the museum to appear critically engaged without ever taking a clear stance.

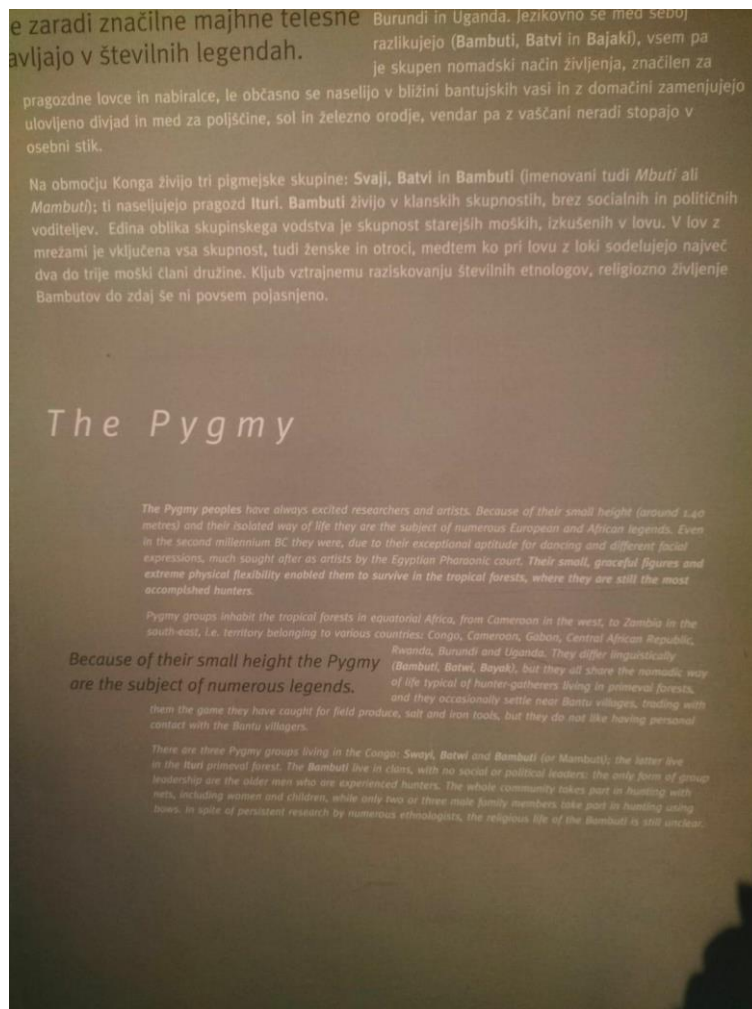


Figure 41: Text for 'The Pygmy' section in 'Distant Worlds', African Collection, SEM (Nguema, 2025)

In the case of the SEM, its permanent exhibition employs outdated and problematic wording. As the text dates back to 2002 (SEM Curator Interview, 2025) and has not been updated, many passages contain vocabulary steeped in racial essentialism, using phenotypical traits to describe entire populations (See Fig.41). Although the text claims to celebrate diversity, it reinforces a reductive framing of African people, primarily through biological difference rather than cultural practice, knowledge or technological accomplishment. What is emphasised is skin tone and physicality, which echoes 19th-century racial classification systems, using vocabulary that categorises and objectifies rather than understanding (See Fig.41). No other physiological description is used in other regional collections, such as the European or Asian sections. This unequal application of racialised descriptors highlights a Eurocentric gaze in which the closer one is to European cultures, the more humanised they appear to be. The curator acknowledged that some sections still display outdated visuals and terminology (SEM Curator Interview, 2025). This includes the continued use of the term 'pygmies', a word now widely understood as derogatory, focusing on stature to dehumanise specific Central African communities. The exhibition also fails to use these groups' self-designated names, perpetuating the practice of naming and framing Others through external categorisations. In contrast to the last two permanent exhibitions, the WMW employs language to reframe

one's understanding of colonial power. In the 'Benin and Ethiopia' section, the names of African civilisations are given prominence (See Fig.35). The curatorial language avoids generic or exoticising language and instead tries to emphasise the political complexity of their history. For instance, instead of using words like 'tribes' or 'artefacts', the lexicon shifts to 'kingdoms', 'empires', and 'material culture', using language that restores dignity and skills to the history being represented (See Fig.35).

The exploration of textual devices across the NM, WMW and SEM reveals how language mediates authority within ethnographic museums. The NM, for instance, maintains a vague curatorial tone, which creates uncertainty about the museum's position regarding the outdated positions it highlights. At the SEM, racial descriptors create a narrative that subtly dehumanises its subjects and reduces the African population to a scientific observation lens. While future curatorial revisions are promised (SEM Curator interview, 2025), the current display is firmly rooted in Eurocentric epistemology. By contrast, the WMW feels the most intentional, avoiding problematic terminology and using language that centres African civilisations.

4.5.4 African perspectives input

Involvement from African institutions or experts varies depending on the exhibition, ranging from co-curation to complete invisibility. As a significant proportion of the African continent's material heritage is held in European museums, the importance of including experts from the country where the artefact originated is paramount. African countries should have a say in defining their history, even when it is displayed abroad. At the SEM, African voices are mainly absent (featuring a couple of 'African' quotes) throughout the collection display, the narrative, or the shaping of the exhibition. While the text does hint at contemporary issues, namely the increase of xenophobia since the 1990s, the mention doesn't invite reflectivity and fails to discuss the role of national institutions in mitigating or perpetuating exclusionary attitudes. While the curators have mentioned that for the next iteration of the permanent exhibition, they will consult with African museums, the current version lacks visible input from African institutions.

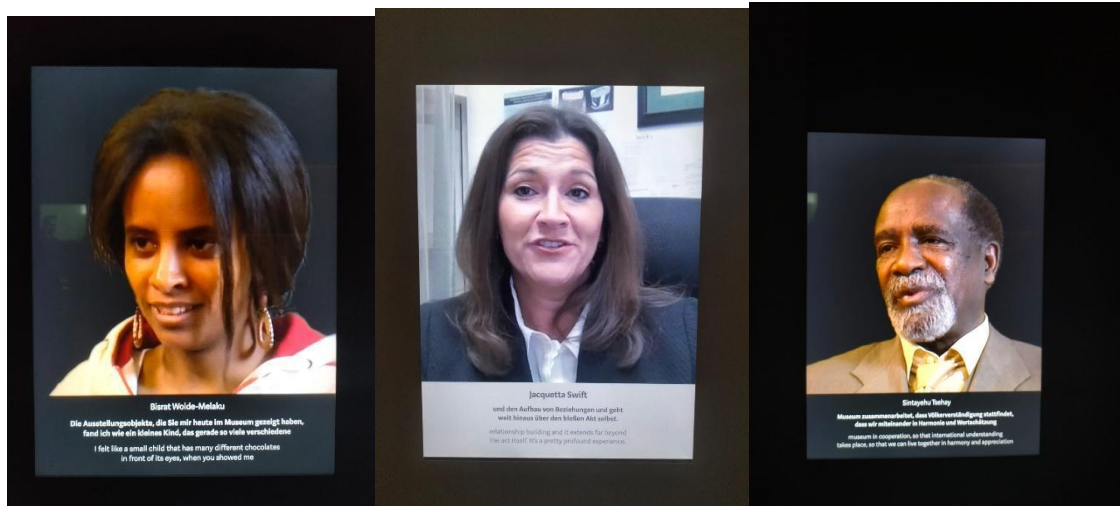


Figure 42, 43, 44: Videos ‘Benin and Ethiopia Art, Power, Resilience’ section and ‘In the Shadow of Colonialism’, WMW (Nguema, 2025)

By contrast, the WMW exemplifies a more visible source of community input. Within the ‘Benin and Ethiopia’ section, the museum incorporates video interviews from scholars, artists, and institutional partners within the African European diaspora and the African continent. These contributions are part of the interpretive structure of the exhibition (see Fig.42, 43 and 44). The contemporary section of this exhibition also features artistic interpretations which bridge these ancient empires to the modern cultural scene, giving visibility to Nigerian and Ethiopian art. However, the museum could delve deeper into decolonial practice, rather than only including African perspectives, and relegate full narrating and curatorial power to the communities represented in the exhibition. Finally, the NM holds a more ambiguous position, as significant ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out in collaboration with African communities, particularly in relation to object identification and provenance research (NM Curator interview, 2025); however, this collaborative work is not reflected in the public-facing exhibitions. Throughout the texts, the institution is the sole narrator, justifying its authority without inviting those collaborators into the storytelling (through quotes, mentions).

In conclusion, the NM, although collaborating with source communities behind the scenes on the research, does not feature diasporic voices in the forefront of its permanent exhibition. The SEM, although having no visible traces of African scholars input, promises a more robust inclusion of ‘African’ perspectives in its future displays. Differentiating itself once again, the WMW explicitly includes African voices through interviews and contemporary content contributions.

4.5.5 Colonial acknowledgement

Museums can struggle to present colonial history, especially when it comes to addressing the violence and power dynamics involved in the acquisition of African artefacts. This subsection examines how the three

museums in this research examine colonial violence and their complicity within it, observing a profound disparity between those which try to repress their past and those which address it directly.

4.5.5.1 Colonial violence

The treatment of colonial violence across museum exhibitions reflects the degree to which institutions are willing to engage with historical complicity and tackle uncomfortable truths through their African artefact collection. At the NM, the museum undertakes detailed research, working directly with source communities to document traditions, histories and meanings behind the objects in its care. This work, however, is not reflected in the interpretive text of the exhibition. It can be noted that the display essentially maintains a universalist tone, presenting an 'ideology-free' viewpoint. There is a clear lack of acknowledgement of power dynamics between the two entities. For instance, in the 'In the Field' section, although the Belgian Congo in the 20th century is acknowledged to be 'the darkest days of colonial rule', the exhibition barely explores the systemic violence that occurred during this era (See Fig.37). Yervasi (2008, p.4) states that King Leopold and the Belgian colonial government forced inhumane natural resource extraction quotas onto the local population, which was driven by 'cruel punishment, such as the loss of limbs or flogging.' This omission minimises the reality of the dynamics between coloniser and colonised, giving a whole new meaning to mentions of 'friendships' and 'alliances', which should be interpreted with caution (See Fig.37). Similarly, the SEM's exhibition text avoids reflection on its complicity in colonial perceptions, failing to address the country's involvement in scientific missions, ethnographic collecting or missionary work practices that contributed to imparting these imperial worldviews.

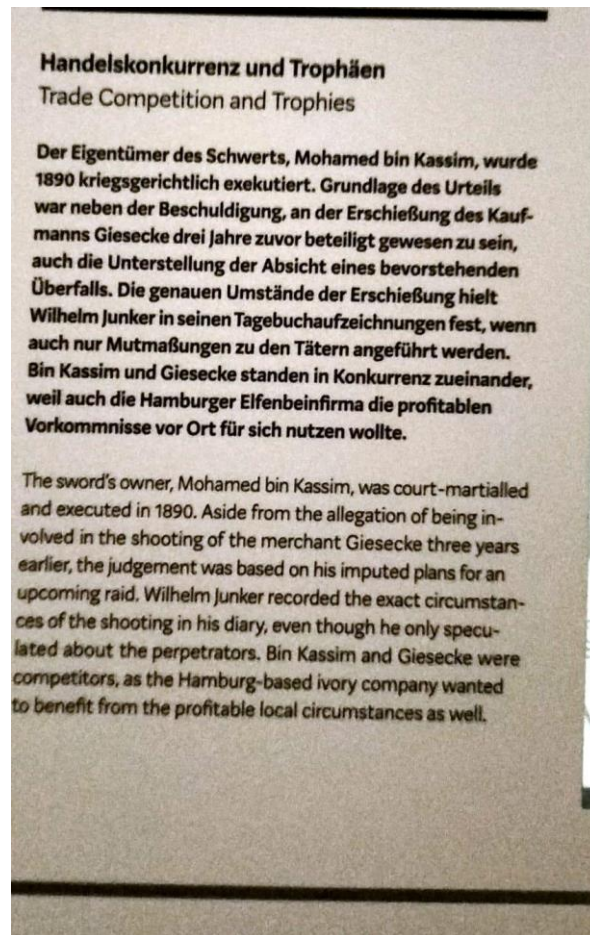


Figure 39: Text 'In the Shadows of Colonialism' section, WMW (Nguema, 2025)

By contrast, the WMW demonstrates a more transparent engagement with colonial violence. Donors such as Alfred Ludwig Sigl and Wilhelm Schmit are named but also contextualised within their ideological frameworks. For instance, in the 'In the Shadow of Colonialism' exhibition, Alfred Sigl is described as having considered the emerging discipline of ethnology as an opportunity to scientifically support the social teachings of the church. It exposes how the notion of 'primitive peoples' was weaponised to validate Christian universality and Western moral authority. This direct mention demystifies the ideological agendas that shaped early ethnographic collecting, exposing their religious, racial and scientific systems of domination.

4.5.5.2 Colonial involvement

As stated in the literature review, all three countries have, at some point, been part of the same Empire and have, to varying degrees, participated in the 19th and 20th century colonial agenda on the continent of Africa. The analysed museums also use different curatorial strategies to tackle their national history.

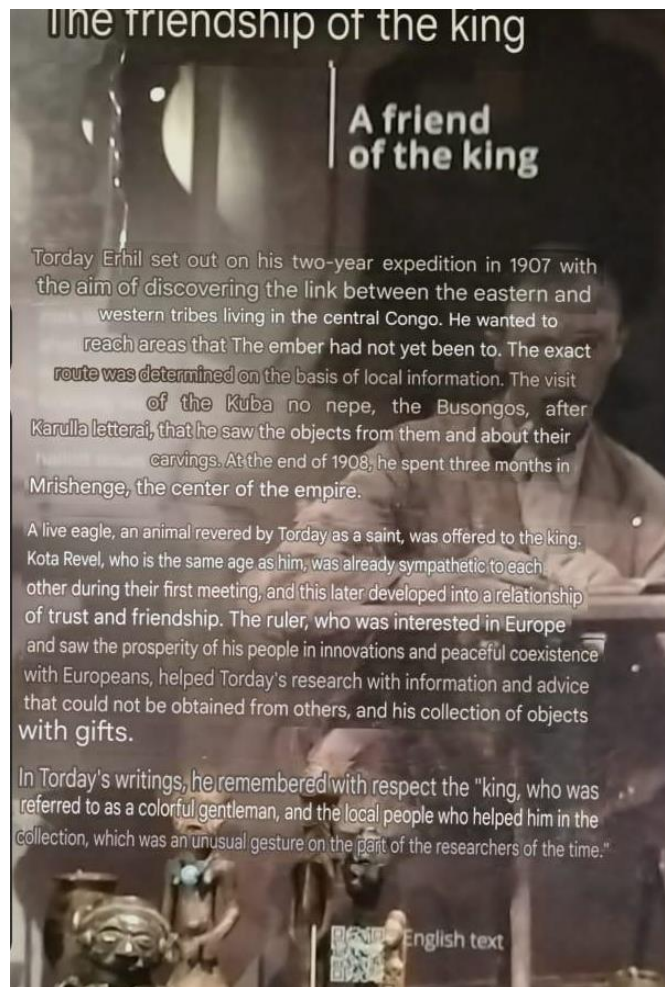


Figure 40: 'In the Field', Text of the friend to a king section in the NM (Nguema, 2025)

The NM, for instance, presents Emily Torday through his 'exceptional achievements' and good character, describing his 'personal attitude of respect and reverence towards locals and the confidential relation he established' (See Fig.37). However, the text omits to state that Emil Torday was an imperial officer and commercial agent working for the Belgian colonial authorities. This role directly contributes to the enforcement of colonial agendas. This celebratory narrative omits the historical realities of Torday's expeditions. For instance, Sheppard (2017, p.12) highlights that one of the explorers' missions aimed to cross 'uncontested' land, whose inhabitants (the Lele, Kuba, Pende, and Chokwe) were engaged in active resistance and warfare against the colonial regime. To bypass this, Torday and Hilton-Simpson employed tactics to 'inspire fear' in the local population and gain access to the territory (Sheppard, 2024, p.2). The curatorial lens glosses over these manipulative tactics, focusing on Emil Torday's distaste for the use of violence that could occur during these ethnographic voyages. The text also addresses Torday's friendship with the king of the Bush Congo (with no further information on him or this geographical region), portraying him as an enlightened figure, eager for European cooperation (See Fig.40). The text fails to address the brutality of the colonial context in which these relationships were formed, thereby presenting a biased picture of these exchanges. This portrayal occults the power asymmetries present at this time and fails to critique the coercive frameworks at play behind seemingly cordial exchanges that took place.

Similarly, the SEM's narrative overlooks the opportunity to critically reflect on the country's indirect involvement in imperial ideologies. For instance, the text does not mention how ethnic shows held in and around Ljubljana contributed to colonial world views.

In contrast, the WMW adopts a more transparent and critical approach; its curatorial voice addresses the ethical and ideological dimensions of Austria's involvement in colonial entanglements despite 'not owning any colonies' (See Fig.39 & 31). The exhibition incorporates repatriation, acquisition ethics, epistemic violence and the role of religion in Imperial expansion. Each section presents a case from a different region, carefully narrating the circumstances in which objects entered the museum collection. Significant donors of the collection are not sanitised and would be presented in their full ideological complexity (See Fig.39).

4.5.5.3 Chapter Findings

The treatment of colonial violence and colonial involvement in museum exhibitions reveals the extent to which institutions are willing to confront their historical complicity in Eurocentrism and colonial systems. The closer proximity the individual countries have had with the West and the perceived agency they had to participate in colonial involvement, the greater the accountability expressed. Countries like Slovenia and Hungary express less accountability towards deeds committed overseas, as they were part of an empire, themselves under governance. A large part of the text obscures the power dynamics occurring during the collection's formation, minimising the violence embedded in these encounters. At the SEM, the narrative also avoids confronting Slovenia's historical ties to imperial ideologies, with little discussion of Slovenian involvement in missionary work, ethnographic villages, and scientific expeditions, therefore contributing to the reproduction of colonial worldviews. WMW, on the other hand, unpacks their country's and history's colonial past, reflecting on the structures of domination and collecting the ethics and epistemologies of violence.

5. Conclusion

This thesis examined how ethnographic museums in Central Europe, specifically Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia, construct narratives around African artefacts by framing architecture, exhibition typology, spatial design, and curatorial text. It also explored the presence or absence of minority perspectives in these narratives and aimed to underscore the degree to which institutions tackle colonial involvement. It can be concluded that museographical choices such as architectural design, colour palettes, and lighting are not neutral.

The findings about the Neprazi Museum, in Budapest, were found to communicate a certain ambiguity and hesitation regarding its collections' colonial entanglements. While its architecture and minimalist, neutral interior project objectivity, modernity and institutional credibility, the curatorial voice tends to avoid discussing Hungarian involvement in colonial historical projects. Although topics such as Orientalism, Black body standards and the curator's gaze are discussed, the concepts resonate as tone-deaf when the museum also fails to mention the violence experienced by said populations, the power relations at play and continuously centres with little critique Europe and Hungary throughout its display. The museum doesn't acknowledge its peripheral involvement in the coloniality of knowledge perpetrated through national ethnographers' centres in African collection displays, instead of the global majority group in question. The museum, while aiming to centre Hungary, a country which is often represented at the margins of Europe, marginalises groups that are even further away from the Eurocentric prism through a silencing of African voices in the displays and the use of Eurocentric aesthetics (white cube) to display their collection. Although representation of diverse artefacts is a first step in the inclusion of minorities in a museum space, due to short staffing, nationalist directives and political restrictions, the NM has a long road ahead to achieve a more inclusive display of its African collection (Coleman, 2016, p.4).

Through its architecture and interior design, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum projects an atmosphere of creativity and new interpretations. Yet, its 2002 display, due to be renovated next year, uses outdated stereotyping display techniques that could impact visitors' perceptions of the African continent. The brown walls, the little context offered throughout the labels and the use of offensive terminology make it a challenging exhibition. No African voices are present in the displays, and the curatorial tone employs descriptive language that relies on phenotypical generalisations of a very diverse continent, thereby separating visitors from the subject. No mention is made of the peripheral involvement of Slovenia in perpetuating the coloniality of knowledge. Although the SEM has African artefacts on display, the new exhibition should integrate African perspectives in its text, avoid controversial vocabulary and question its involvement in the 'xenophobia' that could persist today.

Finally, the Weltmuseum Wien's architecture, reminiscent of an imperial past, challenges coloniality of knowledge by boldly exposing its colonial involvement and taking a clear stance against its own donor's

motives. Through a hybrid model, it uplifts and spotlights two powerful African empires, which subvert stereotypical associations of Africans and primitivity. It asks reflective questions while providing the official position of the museum overtly. Its displays are informed through the input of a diverse group of professionals. If WMW's exhibitions were to achieve maximum inclusivity in their displays containing African artefacts, they would lean into more active curation of artefacts by the community, either in diaspora in Austria or through museum collaborations.

All in all, although the case studies which have been analysed in this research have a rich collection of African artefacts on display, the closer the museum is in terms of its proximity to the West, the closer its elaboration takes into account colonial involvement, differing perspectives and questioning the museum's position towards its visitors. These findings are relevant to museum education as they inform how African heritage in Europe, which still owns many African artefacts, represents this continent. Primarily taught through a European gaze, the visitor gets a limited narrative, which lacks the visible input of African voices, and the persistence of hierarchical display strategies perpetuates a Eurocentric hierarchy of knowledge. These factors can affect the perceptions visitors may come out of the exhibition with reinforced Eurocentric positions. As sites of informal education, museums must critically reassess how their pedagogical function intersects with power, race, and history. Decolonial museology can aid in reframing how Central European museums view the global majority living in their countries. Some aspects that can be incorporated in the displays are the acknowledgement of the country's colonial involvement, research into the provenance of the artefacts exhibited, spotlighting African stories, implementing design strategies which aid the interpretation of African artefacts, and using their stories to teach new ways of viewing the global majority. Additionally, Museums could work closely with African museum professionals, consulting them not only during the research phase but also in the curatorial process. Most of these aspects have already been implemented in the WMW.

Future studies should look at the processes behind selecting artefacts for display. For example, a study could compare the new 'Distant Worlds' exhibition at the SEM with its 2002 predecessor to offer insights into how Central European ethnographic museums might better integrate minority voices into their displays. As this Thesis focuses more specifically on the African continent's heritage, further studies could look into other geographical areas of the world (such as Asia, America and Oceania) and the representation of their material heritage in Central European ethnographic museums. Further research is also needed on the implementation of decolonial museology and museography, in countries still grappling with the legacies of colonialism or operating within nationalist contexts. To further this research, one could also address collection management and the selection of the case studies analysed to present a complete picture, understanding the role of African artefacts in Central European ethnographic museums.

4. Annexes

Annexe A: Consent form for Interviews



College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Narratives of Display: A Comparative Study of the Exhibition of African Artifacts in Central European Ethnography Museums

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I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I acknowledge that participants cannot be fully anonymized, due to the reduced number of participants and their public information available online to the public (IE: function at said museum)

Data usage and storage

- ◇ All names and other material likely to identify individuals (outside the interviewee) will be anonymized.
- ◇ The material will be treated as confidential and kept on my personal password-protected computer for a duration of 5 years prior to the completion of this MA.
- ◇ The material will be retained on my personal password-protected computer for use in future academic research for a duration of 5 years after the completion of this MA.
- ◇ I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

- ◇ I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Consent Methods

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

Consent clause

I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of Researcher Elise NGUEMA Signature

Date

Annexe B: Interview questionnaire

Introduction Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about your role at the museum?

Country-Specific Background Questions

For Hungary :

3. Your background includes fieldwork in rural Ethiopia—how has that experience influenced your work with African collections here?

For Slovenia :

3. How do you think your background as an archaeologist influenced your approach to curating African collections in Slovenia?

Narrative Framing & Interpretation

4.1 Can you tell me a bit about the African collection in your museum? How did it come to be part of the museum's holdings?

4. In the creation of the permanent exhibition, how did you decide whether to focus on the historical, artistic, or cultural aspects of African artefacts?

5. *Would you say that African artefacts in the permanent exhibition are displayed to a broader European context or present them as their own distinct narratives (not linked to European past)?*

6. What kind of visitor reception were you aiming for when you made the exhibition (what the visitor should experience and how they should understand it).?

Collaborations & Multiple Perspectives

7. Do you work with African institutions, scholars, or communities when planning exhibitions? If yes, How do you make sure different perspectives are included when interpreting African artefacts? If no, do you think that in the future this would be possible? what would be the main obstacles for it?

Museographical Choices

8. How do you decide where to place African artefacts in the permanent exhibition space? Do you group them by theme, region, or time period, or mix them with other collections?

9. When preparing an exhibition, did you think about how to tackle stereotypes that could come with displaying African collections?

Decolonial Practices & Institutional Change

10. Have you ever changed how you display or talk about African artefacts because of conversations about decolonisation or repatriation? If yes, can you share an example of a change you've made? If no, are there challenges in addressing these topics?

11. *How do you balance telling the historical story of African artefacts while also showing how they matter today and contemporary perspectives? Are there any challenges in doing this?*

Ethical Considerations & Public Feedback

13. Are there any topics related to African collections that feel particularly sensitive or challenging to address right now and have affected the way these objects are displayed?

Collections Management & Provenance

14. How do you decide which African artefacts to put on display in the permanent exhibition and which to keep in storage?

15. Do you trace the origins or journey of the african artefacts in your permanent exhibition ? If yes, are there any challenges to this work and how do you handle situations where the history of an artefact is unclear or controversial?

16. Has the museum acquired any African objects recently? If so, can you tell me about one and how it came to be part of the collection?

National & Political Context

17.. Do you think the way African heritage is presented in Slovenia/Hungary differs from how it's presented in countries with a colonial history? If so How does Slovenia/Hungary's history—like not having a direct colonial past—shape the way African artefacts are presented in your museum?

18. Are topics like diversity, equity, and inclusion part of the conversations happening in museums in Slovenia/Hungary right now? can you describe the latest practices?

Conclusion Questions

19. Do you see any changes in how the narrative framing of African collections evolving in Slovenian/Hungarian museums in the next 5–10 years?

20. Are there any upcoming projects or exhibitions focused on African collections that you're excited about?

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