

RICHARD BENJAMIN  
International Slavery Museum  
Liverpool

## **Sensitive histories, difficult dialogues: the International Slavery Museum**

### INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will discuss the representation and interpretation of sensitive and difficult dialogues and histories at the International Slavery Museum, and at museums more generally, focussing on exhibitions and permanent collections with subjects that have, at times, been regarded as unrepresentable. I will also discuss the ethical and moral dimensions which are negotiated when considering how sensitive and difficult issues and objects, including those associated with acts of violence, are approached within a museum context.

### INTERNATIONAL SLAVERY MUSEUM

One might assume that the International Slavery Museum (ISM), which is located at the centre of a World Heritage site and only yards away from the dry docks where eighteenth-century slaver ships were repaired and fitted, would focus exclusively on objects associated with the transatlantic slave trade, such as shackles, coffles or whips. Such objects are, of course, central to the museum's collection; but compared to other museums within the same organisation, known as National Museums Liverpool, the collection, in terms of numbers of objects, is relatively small. However, they are very profound.

One display case in particular, entitled 'Loss of identity', draws the gaze of the visitor and often elicits one of the most emotional responses. It is located at the centre of the 'Enslavement and Middle Passage' gallery, which is one of three display galleries (which also include 'Life in West Africa' and 'Legacy'). The opening text on the supporting graphic panel [Fig. 1] notes: 'Sold, branded and issued with a new name, the enslaved Africans were separated and stripped of their identity'. What then follows is an overview of some of the most physical,



1. Loss of identity graphic panel. © Lee Garland

visceral and brutal aspects of chattel slavery, in this case the act of ‘seasoning’: ‘In a deliberate process which sought to break their willpower and render them totally passive and subservient, enslaved Africans were “seasoned” For a period of two or three years they were acclimatised to their work and conditions, ‘trained’ to obey or receive the lash. Here was mental and physical torture. A quarter of the enslaved Africans died during this period. Some took their own lives. Some ran away and joined communities of “maroons” or runaways. Those who survived somehow found ways to endure. They could not escape. There was no hope, either for themselves, or for their children or grandchildren. Slavery was, as far as anyone knew, a nightmare without end’.<sup>1</sup>

### VIOLENCE IN MUSEUMS

The World Health Organisation defines violence as ‘the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation’.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that the representation of violence in a museum can manifest itself in numerous physical and psychological forms that largely fall into two main groups: 1) historical acts of violence (pre–1914), such as the enslavement of Africans during the period of the transatlantic slave trade and the atrocities committed in King Leopold’s Congo Free State; and 2) contemporary violence relating to genocides, war, trafficking, forced labour (e.g. children in sweatshops or picking cotton, which stunts physical and educational development), hate crimes and racially aggravated murders, civil strife (e.g. the fight for conflict–zone raw materials) or acts against a person (e.g. domestic violence).

The latter is a subject that has previously been covered by the incredibly bold exhibition ‘Off the beaten path: violence, women, and art’ by the non–profit Art Works for Change, which addressed gender–based violence that ‘is devastating, occurring, quite literally, from womb to tomb. It occurs in every segment of society, regardless of class, ethnicity, culture, or whether the country is at peace or war’.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition opened at the Stenersen Museum in Oslo, Norway in 2009, and has subsequently travelled to a diverse range of museums and institutions, such as the Tijuana Cultural Center in 2010, and the David J. Sencer Communicable Disease

<sup>1</sup> “Loss of Identity”, display board at International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, UK.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organisation, *World Report on Violence and Health*, <[http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/world\\_report/en/summary\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/summary_en.pdf)> [retrieved: 26 June 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Art Works for Change, *Off the Beaten Path: Violence, Women and Art*, <<http://www.artworksforchange.org/exhibition/off-the-beaten-path-violence-women-and-art>> [retrieved: 30 June 2014].

Center Museum<sup>4</sup> in Atlanta in 2011. By 2015 the exhibition will have reached the Brazilian Museum of Sculpture (MuBE).

Domestic violence has also been starkly confronted at the ‘Museum of Violence’, an exhibition of medical related artefacts, such as x-rays and medical reports of people who have suffered various forms of physical violence instigated by fascism, domestic violence, gender-based violence, homophobia, racism and xenophobia.<sup>5</sup> It was on display at Belgrade Cultural Centre’s Podrum Gallery, in a country where state museums have suffered through disrepair and the lack of funding. Alternative museums such as this, however short-lived, do offer a platform for national dialogue, and in this case, through the medium of violent physical acts. They are important spaces for confronting past events — such as the Balkans conflict in the 1990s — and for allowing citizens a voice in emerging new civic societies.<sup>6</sup>

Let us turn to the museums of varying size which focus on acts of genocide. More commonly known are the museums focusing on the Holocaust (*Shoah*), such as Yad Vashem, the Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Examples of lesser-known museums that have genocide as a core theme (often from a political perspective) include the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which is located on the grounds of a former prison and looks at the mass murder committed by followers of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (commonly referred to as the *Khmer Rouge*) in 1975–1978 (considered part of the greater Third Indochina War, 1975–1991)<sup>7</sup>; and the Armenian Genocide Museum and Institute in Yerevan, Republic of Armenia. This museum provides a definition on its website: ‘The atrocities committed against the Armenian people of the Ottoman Empire during WWI are defined as the Armenian Genocide’.<sup>8</sup> But there is also some debate by genocide studies scholars as to what now constitutes genocide, a term first used by Raphael Lemkin in his 1944 book *Axis rule in occupied Europe*.<sup>9</sup> Lemkin

<sup>4</sup> David J. Sencer CDC Museum: In Association with the Smithsonian Institution, *Off the Beaten Path: Violence, Women and Art*, <<http://www.cdc.gov/museum/exhibits/offbeatenpath.htm>> [retrieved: “bout us, tners-supporters.html entions for correspondence. 1950, Frankfurt 2014.) ng: nd Dokumentation von Forschungs- und Samm30 June 2014].

<sup>5</sup> Museum of Violence, *About us*, <[http://www.museumofviolence.org.rs/about\\_us.html](http://www.museumofviolence.org.rs/about_us.html)> [retrieved: 4 July 2014].

<sup>6</sup> E. Garcia McKinley, J. Babovic, *Alternative Museums in the Former Yugoslavia: Everyday Narratives of the Past, Present and Future*, available at <<http://everydayhistorian.wordpress.com/2013/02/27/alternative-museums-in-the-former-yugoslavia-everyday-narratives-of-the-past-present-and-future>> [retrieved: 4 July 2014].

<sup>7</sup> C. Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide*, Lubbock 2006.

<sup>8</sup> The Armenian Genocide Museum Institute, *Armenian Genocide*, <[http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/armenian\\_genocide.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/armenian_genocide.php)> [retrieved: 26 June 2014].

<sup>9</sup> R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation — Analysis of Government — Proposals for Redress*, Washington (D.C.) 1944.

focussed on religious, racial or ethnic groups (not exclusively on mass killings), and also on other organised acts used to destroy national groups, such as the: ‘destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups’.<sup>10</sup>

The ambiguity of the term is expressed by the plethora of definitions. However, having an understanding of the 1948 ‘Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide’, allows us to recognise some of the key factors which allow museums to interpret various genocides. Article II of the Convention states that: ‘genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group’.<sup>11</sup>

Many genocide scholars now include the destruction of political and social groups in their definition. For instance, an article for Genocide Watch notes that political groups ‘have been the main victims since World War II’.<sup>12</sup> An entire discipline surrounds the study of genocide, and so museums — depending on their locations and structures — can identify and interpret what constitutes a genocidal act (e.g. the *Shoah*), or focus on political and social acts, which might include mass killings specific to them and their audiences. For example, the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, which looks at the occupation of the country by Soviet forces from 1940 to 1991, is located in a former KGB building.<sup>13</sup> To gain some idea of the geographical scope of museums that display such related material, one has only to look at the partner museums and supporters of the annual Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) conference that was inaugurated by National Museums Liverpool in 2010.<sup>14</sup>

Since the International Slavery Museum was opened in 2007, part of our remit has been to develop collections that focus on contemporary forms of slavery and

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> A. J o n e s, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, New York 2010, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> K.-T. E n g, *Redefining Genocide*, available at <[http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/About\\_Gen\\_Redefining\\_Genocide.pdf](http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/About_Gen_Redefining_Genocide.pdf)> [retrieved: 26 June 2014].

<sup>13</sup> Museum of Genocide Victims, *History*, <<http://genocid.lt/muziejus/en/#>> [retrieved: 26 June 2014].

<sup>14</sup> Federation of International Human Rights Museums, *Partners and Supporters*, <<http://www.fihrm.org/about/partners-supporters.html>> [retrieved: 27 June 2014].

enslavement, as well as the legacies of transatlantic slavery (i.e. our racism and discrimination collection of objects, which depict examples of twentieth-century racist caricatures). Discussions with our NGO partners, such as Anti-Slavery International (ASI), have led to a related contemporary collection strategy alongside the established transatlantic slavery collection: ‘A collection which represents contemporary forms of slavery [...] To collect objects associated to contemporary slavery as defined by Anti-Slavery International, i.e. bonded labour, early/forced marriage, forced labour, slavery by descent, trafficking and child labour’.<sup>15</sup>

### ETHICS AND OUTCOMES

Due to the possible nature of future acquisitions, there were, however, regular discussions concerning the ethics of what to display and why. The best illustration of these were discussions about objects related to forced labour or trafficking that might become available to collect after developing partnerships with NGOs such as ASI or with law enforcement agencies. The ISM team felt that if it were done sensitively, with the support and input of our partners, and possibly with that of family members or the individuals themselves, then we should consider collecting and displaying such objects. We were very conscious, however, of not creating a ‘shop of horrors’ or cabinet of curiosities.

One example is the artwork titled ‘Missing’, which was donated to the Museum in 2009 by the artist, Rachel Wilberforce. It consists of a series of photographs of urban and suburban landscapes that reveal the graphic and mundane nature of the sex industry.<sup>16</sup> The artist wanted the work to go to ISM rather than an art gallery or private collection; so when the Museum showed an interest in acquiring the piece, it was removed from a private sale. The Museum also acquired several descent-based slavery anklets from Anti-Slavery International that had been ‘worn’ by a young woman in Niger. Alongside the anklets we placed personal stories of the enslaved, which humanised the objects and the individuals.<sup>17</sup> Not only do these objects bring the subject of contemporary forms of slavery and enslavement into the public view, but at the same time they might also galvanize support for associated campaigns.

---

<sup>15</sup> A. Robinson, S. Carl-Lokko, International Slavery Museum collections development, internal document, 2009, unpublished, cited in R. Benjamin, *Exhibiting Sensitive Histories*, available at <<http://www.fihrm.org/conference/conference-2010/documents/RichardBenjaminExhibitingSensitiveHistories.doc>> [retrieved: 10 October 2015].

<sup>16</sup> International Slavery Museum, ‘Missing’ (2007) by Rachel Wilberforce, <<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/recent/missing.aspx>> [retrieved: 27 June 2014].

<sup>17</sup> R. Benjamin, *Museums and Sensitive Histories: The International Slavery Museum*, [in:] *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. by A.L. Araújo, New York 2012, pp. 192–193.

There are also occasions when the Museum is contacted by members of the public who are in possession of an object that they quite simply do not want, but realise it might have some educational value. Two particular examples come to mind: first, a Ku Klux Klan outfit that was donated weeks before the Museum opened in 2007.<sup>18</sup> This piece is a central exhibit of the Legacy gallery, which also includes objects and multimedia that depict racist and stereotypical imagery of black people, far-right organisations, scientific racism and racist murders such as that of the young black British man Anthony Walker in 2005. Due to my relationship with the Walker family, I also serve as a trustee of the Anthony Walker Foundation.<sup>19</sup>

The second object, a grotesque pseudo-scientific piece, came to the Museum's attention following an email to the curator of ISM in February 2014 under the heading 'Possible piece for museum display'. The writer states: 'I have a box of antique microscope slides, and one of them may be of interest to the public as it is a piece of skin from the days when it was considered in some way desirable to study black people as if they were specimens first and people second [...] The slide has the title 'scalp of negro'. Clearly this is a distressing subject, but I feel this slide may be useful as part of an exhibit to show the attitude European explorers had toward people they encountered'.<sup>20</sup>

So, we have a dilemma: risk being seen as a collector of macabre curios, or have the conviction to try and speak for an individual who may have been scalped? Provenance will be difficult to ascertain, but that does not mean we will totally rule out the possibility of accessioning the object. The fact that the object has been mounted onto a slide for display has, in some ways, already exposed the object to the human stare; but there is still detachment, similar in some ways to that which takes place in modern museums — behind display cases, out of reach. The discussions surrounding this object, which purports to show a piece of a scalped individual, were particularly difficult as the discussion inevitably included whether the act of violence was committed pre-mortem or post-mortem. It is not easy to detach oneself emotionally from such an object: violent, degrading, and imbued with intolerance and misguided attempts at intellectual superiority. Regardless, we agreed that it was worth further discussion, as there might be an opportunity for the Museum to de-objectify and humanise the object in question rather than leave it as a static, ethnographic, microscopic slide.

We must realise that there will always be a degree of distance between the object as seen and displayed in a museum context — often behind cases or barriers — and the real life experiences of that object. This would not only relate to historical objects, but also to more contemporary objects related to slavery and enslavement:

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Walker Foundation, *About the Foundation*, <<http://www.anthonwalkerfoundation.com/about-us>> [retrieved: 14 July 2014].

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous correspondent, Email to International Slavery Museum, February 2014.

personal items of enslaved individuals (keepsakes, belongings) and objects from a relevant environment, such as places of enforced work (brothels, factories) or forced labour in a domestic setting. However, if possible, physical interaction with an individual who is willing to discuss his or her contemporary experiences could possibly authenticate the information that the Museum has displayed.

Powerful objects such as the microscopic slide could have an emotional effect on the visitors as do those objects relating the transatlantic slave trade narrative. Although distance exists in the sense that none of the objects from this period were used, made or traded in the modern era, this does not mean that they are free from emotional associations for modern visitors — especially those who feel some sort of ancestral affiliation with Africa and enslaved Africans. Contemporary objects, such as the Anti-Slavery International anklets, also have the potential to galvanise support for the human rights campaigns they endorse, reminding visitors that the individuals who are subject to a particular enslavement might well be still alive.

Both ‘Missing’ and the anklets form part of our collections that have been collected through the development of the ‘Legacy’ gallery. This allows the Museum to broaden people’s understanding of the subject of slavery and enslavement and tackle contemporary issues of social justice — unlike our predecessor, the ‘Transatlantic Slavery Gallery’ (in National Museums Liverpool), which opened in 1994 and closed in 2006. As such, the temporary exhibitions we have so far exhibited within the ‘Legacy’ gallery have been heavily influenced by our partnerships with human rights organisations like ASI, which collaborated on our ‘Home alone: end domestic slavery’ exhibition. That exhibition highlighted a two-year campaign intended to raise awareness about the plight of domestic workers in the United Kingdom and abroad. The Museum has also worked with the Environmental Justice Foundation on ‘White gold: the true cost of cotton’ exhibition, which highlighted the abuse of labour rights in the cotton industry, primarily in Uzbekistan.

#### IMAGING VIOLENCE

The edited volume ‘Does war belong in museums?: the representation of violence in exhibitions’<sup>21</sup> came out of a conference of the same name in 2011. It describes how representations of war and violence in museums can develop through a fascination with terror and the instruments of terror, and that museums addressing these issues have to avoid trivialising war and violence and turning it into a tourist spectacle. Questions arise as to what images of violence does one

---

<sup>21</sup> *Does War Belong in Museums?: The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*, ed. by W. Muchitsch, Bielefeld 2013.



generate and why? This leads me into a discussion about the dynamics of imaging violence within ISM.

Indeed, our 2014–2015 exhibition ‘Brutal exposure: the Congo’, that was located in the Campaign Zone exhibition space in the Legacy gallery, brought such discussion to the fore. The exhibition features photographs from the collection of ASI, mainly taken by missionary Alice Seeley Harris, which document exploitation and brutality in the early 1900s in the Congo Free State, the fiefdom of King Leopold II of Belgium. In one of the first human rights campaigns, the photographs exposed the deeply rooted hypocrisy of so-called ‘colonial benevolence’ which cost the lives of millions of Congolese.

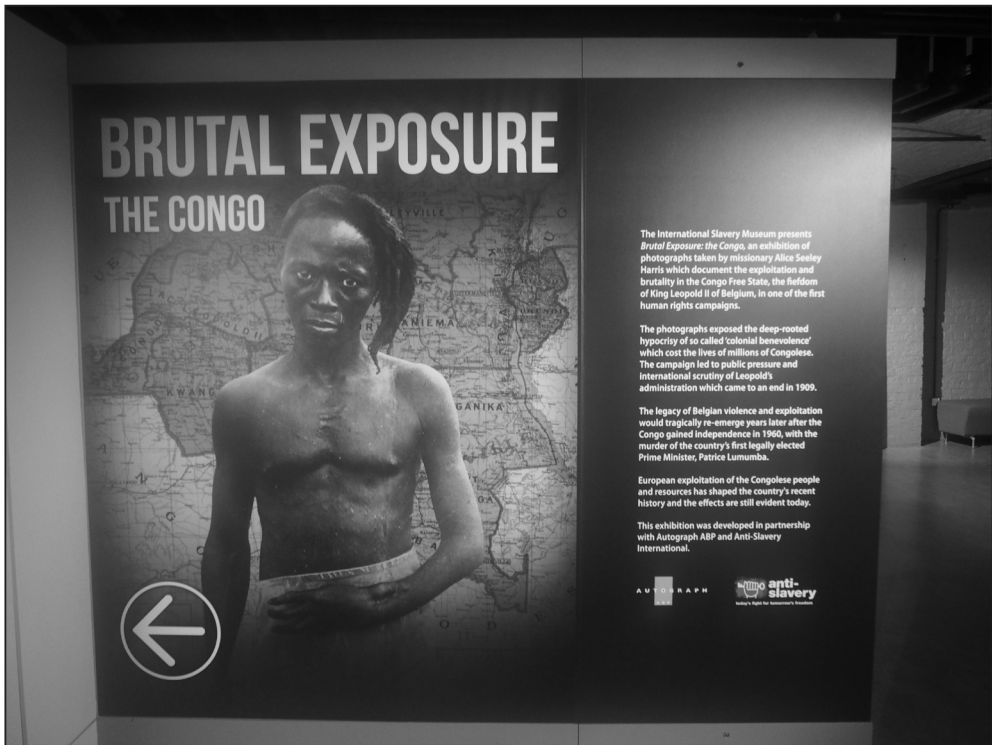
This early twentieth-century campaign led to public pressure and international scrutiny of Leopold’s administration, which came to an end in 1909 — although the legacy of Belgian violence and exploitation would tragically re-emerge, after the Congo gained independence in 1960, with the murder of the country’s first legally elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. Mark Sealy, the director of Autograph ABP, contacted the Museum to see if we were interested in collaborating and developing an exhibition using these images. Autograph ABP is based in the Rivington Place Gallery in London and was established in 1988 to promote historically marginalised photographic practices. The Museum worked closely with Sealy, who had carried out extensive research on Harris after he became aware of a series of her slides in the Anti-Slavery International collection. In London from January to March 2014, the partner exhibition to our own ‘Brutal exposure’ was ‘When harmony went to hell: Congo dialogues’, which featured Harris’s images on display next to the contemporary work of Sammy Baloji, the acclaimed Congolese artist whose images investigate colonial legacies.

Several years ago I visited Rivington Place to see the extremely powerful ‘Without sanctuary: lynching photography in America’ exhibition (curated by Mark Sealy) which through photographs, postcards and memorabilia was a ‘visual testament to lynching as a form of social violence in the United States of America from 1880 to the 1960s’.<sup>22</sup> As with ‘Brutal exposure’ and ‘When harmony went to hell’, Mark Sealy’s approach centres on keeping the format of the exhibitions ‘honest’ — i.e. not altering the images, if at all possible. He seeks to maintain the essence of the image, showing it in its uncensored, original condition, rather than cropping it for design or stylistic reasons.

Within the Legacy gallery of the Museum, on the ‘Fight for freedom and equality wall’ exhibit, we display the image of one Laura Nelson, hanging from a bridge in Oklahoma in 1911. It is a deeply distressing image that has been manipulated; designed to work stylistically with the larger exhibit. This first occurred to me when I saw the full image in the ‘Without sanctuary’ exhibition. In

---

<sup>22</sup> Rivington Place, *Without Sanctuary*, <<http://www.rivingtonplace.org/WithoutSanctuary>> [retrieved: 10 December 2015].



2. Brutal Exposure exhibition panel. © Richard Benjamin

the original image, Laura Nelson is shown with her son, who had also been lynched — a significant feature, one which I feel should have been looked at in greater detail when the images were selected prior to the Museum opening in 2007. I am sure many museum professionals have the experience of opening an exhibition or gallery with the varying requests or demands of curators, designers, architects, etc. However, I feel that images of such intensity, which depict personal suffering, must be displayed and interpreted in their original form as much as possible. Otherwise, the image could lose its context.

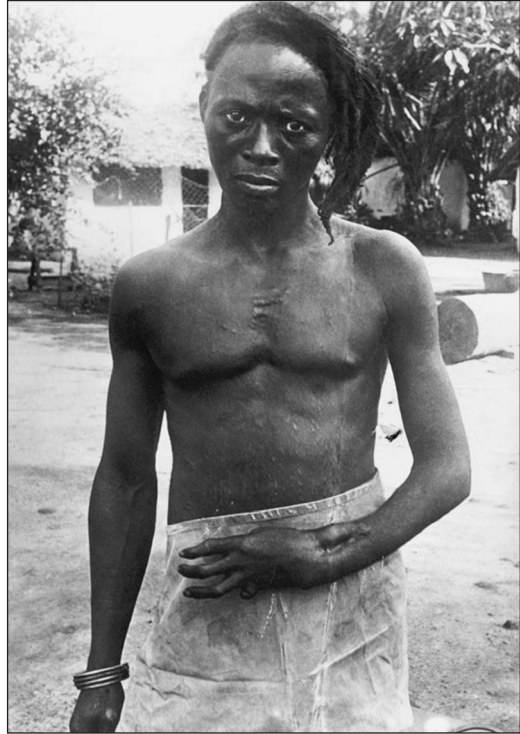
Although I was not one of the section leaders<sup>23</sup> who worked on developing exhibits in the racism and discrimination section of 'Legacy', who selected the image of Laura Nelson, I did have a say on other images which were being sourced. For example, an image relating to another lynching, this time of Frank Embree, in Missouri, 1899. It is the lead image from the 'Without sanctuary' exhibition and shows a very muscular and proud man, even in the face of what he knew was his impending death. The image is interesting in that it almost makes the surrounding

<sup>23</sup> Section leaders wrote text and chose photographs for displays within certain parts of the display galleries. These included educationalists, maritime historians and archaeologists.

white mob look comical, weak and even provincial; the agency comes from Frank Embree. Yes, he becomes the victim, but before he does, he is a proud man.

However, a decision was made by myself and a member of the project team not to use this particular image as it became apparent that there were copyright issues related to another image, which we realised was part of an original set of three, shown in 'Without sanctuary'. We felt that the full narrative of this bestial act of lynching should be told in its entirety. With hindsight, one can say that the one image was powerful enough to engage people, and through accompanying text the event could have been fully exposed. But what this example shows is that images of violence wield immense power and create museographical dialogue and debate.

The lead image of the 'Brutal exposure' exhibition elicited some vigorous discussions between colleagues from the marketing team and the curatorial team. The powerful and graphic lead exhibition image [Fig. 2] shows an individual called Lomboto, who had been shot by a rubber concession sentry. The original image [Fig. 3] shows Lomboto standing in what seems to be a village. But some colleagues thought this too stark and suggested a montage lead image that included other individuals, such as King Leopold II and the campaigner E.D. Morel, superimposed on a historical map of the Belgian Congo. However, this would have partially covered Lomboto's disfigured hand, which caused me some concern. Finally, after some arbitration from the Director of National Museums Liverpool, Lomboto became the main focus of the lead image, the compromise being that the historical map stayed. Regardless, the final image, seen on posters and marketing material, is still potent and poignant, and the process by which it came about highlights just some of the dilemmas which exist when imaging violence within an exhibition.



3. Lomboto, shot in the wrist and hand by a rubber concession sentry and permanently disabled as a result, early 1900s. The Harris Lantern Slide Show. © Anti-Slavery International / Autograph ABP

## CONCLUSION

From the outset, any museum that at its core focusses on the subject of slavery and enslavement, or any number of highly disturbing and sensitive subjects, must be prepared for the sensitivities which have to be negotiated in the production and delivery of a display. At times this can take its toll, but it is through the sharing of ideas and experiences, both positive and negative, with colleagues from the museum sector and beyond, that you are able to move forward in the hope that the public appreciates that you are taking into consideration associated cultural, social and political issues and dialogues — and idealistic as it might seem to some, embracing external forces rather than taking a neutral stance. The successful development of ‘Brutal exposure’ in our growing partnership with ASI and other human rights organisations is due to the fact that all parties want the same thing: to highlight often marginalised and challenging parts of history or contemporary society, and at the same time to challenge prevailing attitudes and actions. The depiction of violence within our Museum has a place, not only in creating a narrative understanding of a subject, but also in humanising the actors and agents.

However, I cannot, of course, speak on behalf of other museums and museum professionals, and am more than aware of the challenges which they might face when dealing with difficult subjects and issues; none more so than the daily realities of museum work, i.e. the lack of time for carrying out research, which is both deserved and necessary. There might also be a lack of training available — at ISM, for instance, staff are encouraged to attend training days for NGOs dealing with human trafficking, and police training on recognising hate crimes — in order to develop the skills and understanding needed to deal with such issues.<sup>24</sup>

If these issues (and fears) are addressed, being an active museum and promoting social justice can be achieved in a number of ways: through exhibitions, educational resources, and talks, and by way of multiple formats, including objects, photographs and film. Of course, the location of such interventions will also be connected with the present. For instance, Liverpool could be said to have come to terms with its place in the narrative of the transatlantic slave trade. With ISM, the annual Slavery Remembrance Day events on 23 August, and an official civic apology in 1999, Liverpool can, to a certain degree, lay claim to be the most proactive city in the United Kingdom in recognising its role in transatlantic slavery, but it is doing so in a way that aims to take the city forward. ISM offers a strong educational aspect, holding regular workshops and handling sessions, and producing resources on the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary issues and legacies (i.e. our ‘Contemporary slavery teachers’ resource’ and the ‘Legacies of

---

<sup>24</sup> J. Kidd, *Challenging History: Reviewing Debate within the Heritage Sector on the ‘Challenge’ of History*, available at <<https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/museumsociety/documents/volumes/kidd.pdf>> [retrieved: 15 July 2014].

transatlantic slavery' teaching resource). These resources cover everything from forms of racism to conflict materials,<sup>25</sup> and both are suitable for use in the United Kingdom National Curriculum.

Putting it simply, it is not only about highlighting past or present crimes and misdemeanours; rather, such resources can lead to a greater understanding of issues which are relevant today, and they can enable people, especially young people, to navigate and make sense of the issues, and then act accordingly. Could an exhibition be created in Belgium on the country's involvement in over one hundred years of Congo's history, when the dialogue is still so very raw?<sup>26</sup> My simple answer would be: yes, as long as the aim is to instigate pathways to enhance dialogue in the present. Modern society and modern dialogues, through interaction with museums, can engage with difficult and sensitive histories and narratives (the depiction and interpretation of violence and violent acts is part of this process in the museum space), and can in some way mitigate the impacts of such histories and narratives.

Vivienne Szekeres, as a curator and director at the Migration Museum in Adelaide, has addressed difficult and sensitive issues which covered Australia's history (a history imbued with racism and colonialism), asks: 'What role can — and should — museums play in interpreting and mediating these difficult pasts? And how do museums navigate the minefields of competing expectations and different versions of history?'<sup>27</sup> I believe it should be an active role, and without doubt it will be laden with difficulties. The past cannot be erased, and should not be erased. And although sometimes difficult to digest, the representation of violence within a museum might just be the medium to make a difference, and possibly avert violent personal or group actions in the future.

---

<sup>25</sup> National Museums Liverpool, *Schools and Groups*, <<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/learning/index.aspx>> [retrieved: 14 July 2014].

<sup>26</sup> V. Bragard, 'Indépendance!': *The Belgo–Congolese Dispute in the Tervuren Museum*, "Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge", vol. IX, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> V. Szekeres, *The Past is a Dangerous Place: The Museum as a Safe Haven*, [in:] *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. by E. Lehrer, C.E. Milton, M.E. Patterson, Basingstoke 2011, p. 52.