

Connecting to Constituents:
(Re-)identifying and serving culture-minded Communities
in Hong Kong

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Museums play a vital role in preserving culture, but their true impact comes from understanding and engaging with their communities. By listening to local voices, museums can create inclusive, relevant exhibits that reflect the people they serve. This means collaborating with community leaders, artists, and educators to ensure diverse perspectives are represented.

When museums know their audience, they can address historical gaps, celebrate underrepresented stories, and foster a sense of belonging. For example, a museum in a multicultural neighbourhood might host bilingual tours or feature exhibits on minority population heritage and culture.

Community involvement also strengthens outreach. Workshops, youth programs, and the teaching of, for example, children with learning difficulties make museums more accessible and encourage broader participation. Social media and surveys can help gather feedback, ensuring continuous improvement.

Ultimately, a museum that knows its community becomes more than a repository of artifacts—it transforms into a dynamic space for dialogue, education, and shared identity. By prioritizing connection over mere curation, museums can remain vital, evolving institutions that truly serve the public.

How Museums Engage with Diverse Communities

Museums have long been regarded as institutions that preserve and showcase cultural, historical, and artistic heritage. However, their traditional role as elite, exclusionary spaces has been increasingly challenged in recent decades. Today, museums are expected to be more inclusive, accessible, and representative of the diverse communities they serve. Engaging with diverse audiences—whether defined by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, disability, or other factors—has become a key priority for museums worldwide.

This presentation offers examples of the various strategies museums use to engage with diverse communities, including community partnerships, inclusive programming, decolonization efforts, digital outreach, and educational initiatives. By examining these approaches, we can better understand how museums are evolving to become more equitable and socially relevant institutions.

Community Partnerships and Co-Curation

One of the most effective ways museums engage with diverse communities is through partnerships. Rather than imposing narratives from the top down, many museums now collaborate with local communities to co-create exhibitions and programs.

In 2016, the University Museum and Art Gallery teamed up with African American collectors to present an exhibition in Hong Kong focusing on the political and cultural achievements of members of a minority that is often not recognized in art and history displays. At the University, we collaborated with the American Studies programme to engage undergraduate students and had them write about the exhibits and give public guided tours.



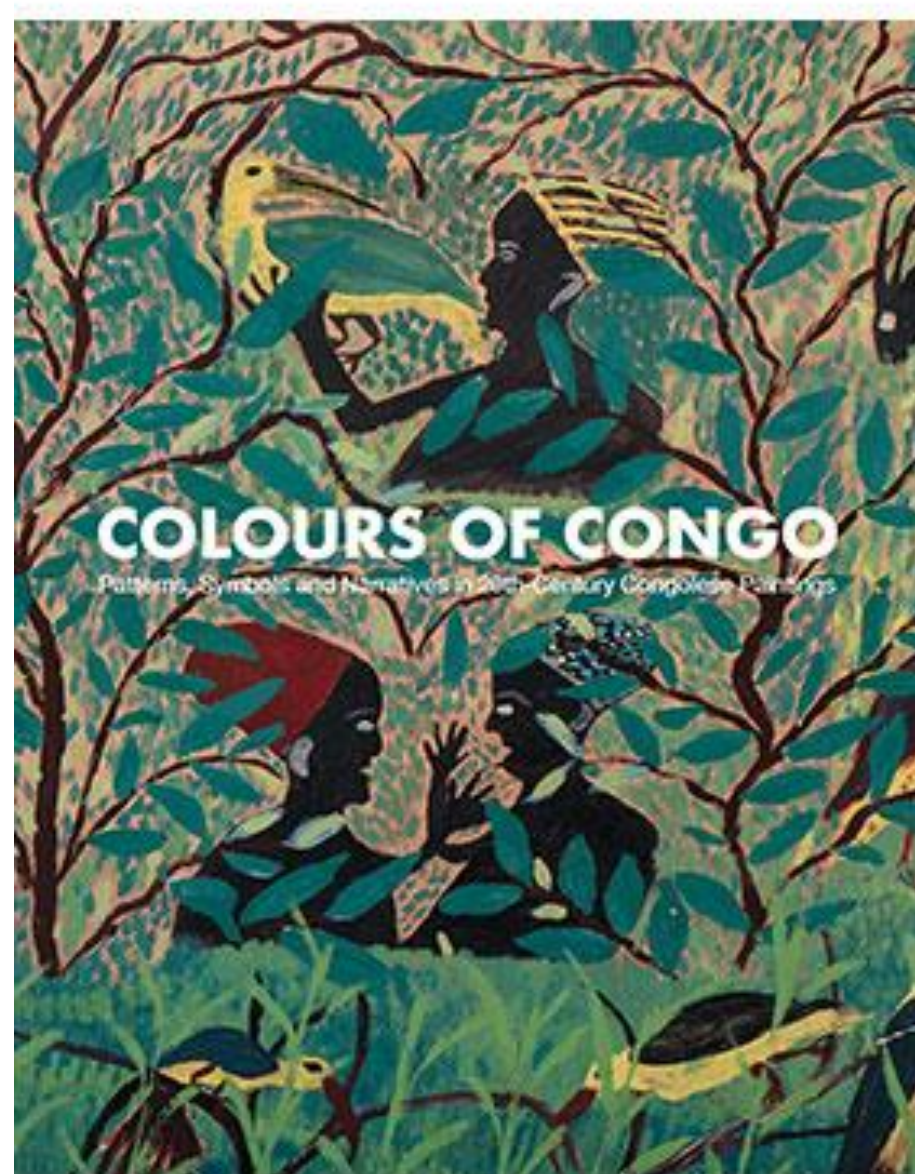


大學教育資助委員會 UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMITTEE

Reframing the Kinsey Collection for Local Audiences and Raising Awareness of African American History and Culture in Hong Kong

Summary of the impact

We raised awareness of issues of racial justice and equality in the local community by bringing one of the world's largest and most important private collections of African American art and history to Hong Kong. As a result of his research on the traumatic and marginalised histories of minority groups, we played an essential role in the exhibition "Rising Above: The Kinsey African American Art & History Collection," which was held at the University Museum and Art Gallery between December 2016 and February 2017 and attracted over 15,000 visitors from Hong Kong and abroad. Our research shaped how these materials were presented to the Hong Kong public and contextualised the contents of the exhibition through a series of public lectures, which were later turned into a book. The exhibition and affiliated events generated significant media coverage, raising awareness of African American history and art and educating the public about the effects of institutionalised racism and the importance of diversity. This was the first time the collection had been exhibited outside of the United States. In addition to cultural and social impacts on the Hong Kong public, it impacted on the Kinseys' work by disseminating it to a wider international audience while helping them to recognise different aspects of its significance and potential. It also benefitted sponsors through the publicity the exhibition generated for their own diversity initiatives and in the collaborative networks it produced.



Colours of Congo

In 2021, we presented an exhibition on 20th- century Congolese paintings – a cooperation with European lenders that allowed us to research, publish and display the artistic excellence of local painters in the Congo, and the interesting (not all colonial) influences that advanced their work. We invited students from the African Studies programme to learn, write and publish with us and welcomed French language student from the Alliance Francaise and members of the (arguably small) African community in Hong Kong to engage with our exhibits.

<https://umag.hku.hk/project/360-congo/>

https://www.afhongkong.org/cn/cultural-events/francophonie/?s8-datarepeater2_rows=50&s8-datarepeater1_rows=50

These partnerships ensure that exhibitions were not only about a community but also for them to engage with in multiple ways, fostering trust and deeper engagement.

Inclusive Programming and Representation

Museums are increasingly aware of the need to represent diverse voices in their collections and exhibitions. This means moving beyond Eurocentric narratives and including marginalized histories.

Both migrant workers from, for example, the Philippines and Indonesia and their culture are little celebrated in Hong Kong despite the local society's reliance on and professional interactions with these minority communities. The University Museum addressed this lack of awareness by showing a fine collection of Bulul sculpture from the Luzon and a large variety of ikat textiles from the Indonesian archipelago.

These exhibitions were well received by the local – Chinese – community members of which many did not know so much about the culture of the communities portrait, but we did not reach the desired number of Filipino and Indonesian visitors that we had hoped for. We worked with the designated consulates to address the communities through social media, but did not plan the exhibition projects by inviting community members to contribute and connect.



Digital Engagement and Accessibility

Technology has opened new avenues for museums to reach diverse audiences, especially those who cannot visit in person. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many museums, like the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), expanded their digital offerings, making art and history more accessible to, especially, school children who were cut off from access to 'public' galleries.

In Hong Kong, we learned from the AGO's – to my knowledge unparalleled – success and started creating the online platform *University Learning Labs* on which we teach Chinese art, history and culture with museum objects from our collection. Whereas locally this approach is welcomed as it offers an easy, also playful, approach to cultural heritage and helps answer some of the larger looming questions about identity and belonging, we now also teach a global class to university students from Australasia, Europe and America in which different participants learn about their own and other collaborating members' cultures.

<https://umag.hku.hk/education/ulearninglabs/>



香港大學美術博物館
University Museum and Art Gallery
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ulearninglabs.umag.hku.hk



Educational Programs for Diverse Audiences

Museums play a crucial role in education, offering programs tailored to schools, families, and adult learners from different backgrounds. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the University Museum strives hard to bring some of our newly gained online audiences to the museum galleries. Our team has created 'junior curator' programmes that offer free courses (this year we strung them together into a 10-session semester-long training) to teach with original objects in the galleries and practice interpretation and communication.

This outreach is open to different local schools – also from underserved districts – and brings children to the museum (and the university!) some of whom have never even been to the central part of Hong Kong. Our efforts reach those school pupils who are interested in Chinese culture and heritage and there is no 'qualifying' measure. At HKU, our programme runs in parallel also to a more elite course that identifies the very best high school students to interest them in the university's teaching.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite progress, museums still face challenges in connecting to constituents:

- Some institutions include diversity superficially without meaningful change.
- Other, often smaller museums, lack resources for extensive outreach.
- Many museums are held back by a resistance to change – an observation that may relate both to their internal structure and their public outreach.

In our postgraduate programme in Museum Studies we discuss these challenges with our students and aspire to train a young generation of colleagues that cherish and advance also our shared principles and values, such as those published by ICOM. We want these strong and mindful professionals to recognize that museums are transforming from exclusive repositories of elite culture into dynamic, inclusive spaces that reflect and engage diverse communities. Through partnerships, inclusive programming, decolonization efforts, digital outreach, and educational initiatives, they are becoming more relevant and accessible.

Conclusion

As society continues to evolve, museums must remain responsive to the needs of their audiences, fostering dialogue, equity, and shared cultural understanding. By doing so, they can fulfill their potential as truly democratic institutions that serve everyone. This is very hard to achieve and many museums and their situations differ. From our humble experience we learned that with opportunities come responsibilities.

Today, museums are increasingly recognizing that their survival and relevance depend on meaningful engagement with minority communities. By embracing co-creation, repatriation, multilingual access, workforce diversity, and youth outreach, they can move beyond being passive repositories of culture to becoming active agents of social change.

While challenges remain, the ongoing efforts to center minority voices mark a transformative shift in the role of museums—from exclusionary institutions to inclusive, equitable spaces that reflect the true diversity of society. [HK Museum of History]