

# MUSEUMS JOURNAL

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# Institutions are obligated to fulfil individual needs, says Dorcas Taylor

## Deploying a human rights-based lens may help museums address power imbalances

**W**hat do we fight to hold on to, but know little about? Human rights. It may feel conceptual, yet it is the yardstick against which all decisions that affect our lives – and those of others – are (or should be) measured.

The human rights framework that we recognise today appears to touch our lives only through headline decisions concerning the European Court of Human Rights, or news reports on, for example, the UK government's proposed Rwanda legislation. So, what exactly are our rights? Who is accountable if our rights are limited or denied? How can they be held to account?

All individuals are rights holders, with Indigenous and some minoritised groups having collective, as well as individual, rights. States, through their governing bodies, are duty bearers, responsible for enabling, protecting and fulfilling rights. Contemporary international human rights law emerged as a legacy of the second world war, when countries coming together as the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Cultural rights have an equal place in the mix. Article 27 of the UDHR states: "Everyone has a right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community."

Cultural rights are called the "Cinderella" of rights, though, as governments prioritise other rights over them. This is usually evidenced by how much they invest in arts and culture. When artistic freedom is challenged, or the repatriation of cultural artefacts is under debate, cultural rights are often called on to defend or advance a cause.

Of equal relevance for museums is their role in supporting people to retain their cultural identities in diverse social contexts, particularly when they have experienced marginalisation. Here, remaining attentive to cultural rights can lead to a more nuanced understanding of communities. For example, when addressing colonial legacies through Congolese artefacts in Scarborough Museums and Galleries' collection, we reached out to Bradford's Congolese community, recognising that these objects are important to Congolese communities.

A human rights approach – based on non-discrimination, participation and accountability – provides a framework. Those three principles need interrogating and negotiating by organisations, and with communities, to ensure there is shared understanding and agreement regarding what they mean in a specific context.

As publicly funded museums are, essentially, instruments of the state, they

**'Cultural rights are often called on to defend or advance a cause'**

museums approaching relationships with their communities through a rights-based lens may help address power imbalances.

Adopting an approach that recognises the institution is obligated to fulfil the needs of the individual, and can be held to account, has the potential to make room for greater power sharing, bypassing traditional concepts of institutional "do-gooding" or benevolent approaches to community engagement that perpetuate an unequal distribution of power.

Museums fulfil many of their obligations by offering access to cultural heritage and developing exhibition programmes built around their communities' needs. Many institutions are addressing injustices caused by Britain's colonial past, or adopting inclusive practices to support social justice. Talking about museum ethics through a rights-based lens may seem a question of semantics. However, rights speak can influence decision-makers and affect social change.

The human rights regime, and the ethical framework on which it was based, was developed at a particular moment in time by European society asserting European values. These beliefs may not always align with the values and norms of cultures and communities with different world views or social structures. When we start to engage with rights in our work, it is important to question what we have signed up to. Rights give us the right to do this, paradoxically.

have a duty to help it fulfil its obligations under human rights law. Organisations in receipt of public funding have a similar obligation. The language of rights used here may feel abstract. However,



Dorcas Taylor is the head of collections and interpretation at Scarborough Museums and Galleries

## Policy

Diversity and climate change are priorities, says Steve Miller

**A**s I write this, I am a couple of weeks away from taking on the role of Museums Association (MA) president from the brilliant Gillian Findlay. I am excited about the prospect, and am looking forward to speaking to MA members around the nations (and to hopefully visiting some great museums I have never been to before).

When I reflect on initial priorities, it feels like a vitally important time for the sector, with much work to be done. It is hard to escape the fact that museums of all sizes and governance structures face incredible funding pressures. Local authorities particularly face unprecedented challenges and I know that the MA will be doing everything it can to support and advocate for our members during the coming months.

I will also give my full support to the MA's work on workforce diversity. Museums can thrive now and into the future only if they are representative of the communities in which they sit.

Finally, with the many challenges facing the sector, it would be easy to be drawn from our long-term goal relating to climate change. Museums have an unparalleled role in engaging communities in the most critical work of our time, leveraging their position as trusted organisations with inspirational collections and strong relationships with visitors and partners to make the biggest impact they can.

Steve Miller is the Museums Association's new president



Scarborough Museums has been addressing colonial legacies through Congolese artefacts in its collection