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Museum coloniality: displaying Asian art in the whitened context

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of Musée Guimet and the transition of museums in the ‘countries of origin’ of its collections elucidates how *white-cube* crystallises Western cultural hegemony by erasing the colonial past of the objects and by representing the physical form of modernity. It contributes as well to nullifying the demand of repatriation, which seems to merely raise new power struggles rather than to recover indigenous beliefs (or identities). Through such a *muséographie*, the deities of the *Other* are ‘elevated’ from ethnographic specimen into art in the West while ‘diminished’ from sacred icons into art or historical artefacts in Asia. Museumification as such constitutes a whitening (Westernisation) heritage process that physically and epistemologically secularises non-Western faiths. Although the temple-simulated design is applied and limited Buddhist practice allowed in certain exhibition milieu or tourism destination, the phenomenon of museum coloniality is to be further studied should cultural diversity be indispensable for better heritage futures.

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Introduction

Aim and starting point

Originated from Europe, museum culture has spread to the non-Western world thanks to colonialism (Hamlin 1946). After WWII, between 1945 and 1960, three dozen new states achieved autonomy or outright independence from their European colonial rulers. Museums as a colonial institution legacy have suffered little criticism and were well kept and proliferated in these states. Coming into the post-conflict era, even China – the major communist regime behind the Iron (or Bamboo) Curtain – has experienced a museum boom. Through the museum window, it seems that the ways of seeing and using cultural heritage have become identical over the globe with major museums of Western Europe and North America as prototypes. Having signed the *Declaration on the Importance of Universal Museums* (Schuster 2004), the *Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet* (Musée Guimet, MG) are one of them. Reputed as the ‘world’s biggest Asian art museum outside of Asia’, this museum since the post-War era has been employing the *muséographie* of white-cube (O’Doherty 1976), which was further refined in the late 1990s with contemporary features of trending architectural style in functionalism and minimalism – tall ceiling, screened natural light, open space, white wall, polished cement floor, white stand, least amount of panel and minimum-sized label – to make the space void of any ‘noise’ or free of context for underlining the ‘beauty’ of the objects in the display. Invented for a modern art exhibition by Bauhaus, the use of white-cube in MG implies that aesthetic characteristics of artefacts should be the only norm and value conveyed to the viewers as justified by art historians, whose ‘scientific knowledge’ has been universalised to the rest of the world over the 20th century. Nevertheless, museum-goers today may find it surprising that the first

exhibitions of MG were highly 'authentic' to the objects' original cultural contexts, which the founder *Emile Guimet* (1836–1918) had neither concealed nor eliminated but reproduced and presented with elaborate *mise-en-scène* exhibit, theatrical guide, and live performance of religious ritual and dance. In fact, MG was not dedicated to art but religions when built originally in Lyon in 1879 (Francotte 2017). The transformation of MG in Paris (from a private museum of religions to a national and universal museum of art) together with the museum development in the 'countries of origin' (M'Bow, Amadou-Mahtar 1979) of MG's collections in Asia (from the colonial museums of the metropolises to the national museums of independent states) provides an impeccable example illustrating how the religious objects of the *Other* are turned from ethnographic specimen to works of art in the West and from sacred relics to art or historical artefacts in Asia.

It is based on the observation as such that the research design of this paper is constructed. Focusing on the curatorial practice and the exhibition format embodied in the white-cube through which the epistemological transformation has advanced covering the deification of art, and the commodification of cultural object, this paper (centred around MG and its peers in Asia) aim to investigate a set of general museum(s) presentations using the concept of 'coloniality' to provoke more thoughts on the global hegemony of Western forms and practices of cultural modernity, the legitimacy of white-cube and how to decolonise the museums (and collections) of the *Other* both in the West and in Asia.

Although the studies on the contextualization of museum objects are already abundant (Ivan. and Lavine 1991; Dean 1996) and the postcolonial museology thriving (MacLeod 1998; Chambers et al. 2016; Tlostanova 2017; Soares and Leshchenko 2018), it remains still absent an investigation on the configurable and shifting relationship between the 'form' (physical space) and 'content' (conceptual space) of exhibition milieu (in Western universal museums and Asian national museums) at meta-level under the premises of postcolonialism, especially in light of the paradox resulted from the museumification of (religious) heritage artefacts and the secularisation of local beliefs in the countries of origin – a question far beyond what repatriation can resolve. With a phenomenological inquiry from a multidisciplinary and transcultural perspective, this research constitutes a novel approach to understanding the subject of 'museum coloniality', of which the findings will fix the critical knowledge gap between the theoretical discussions of heritage and museum studies, art history, postcolonial studies, cultural policy and sociocultural anthropology.

Conceptual framework

To delineate the knowledge landscape of 'museum coloniality' manifested by MG and its Asian variations, a literature review is accomplished on the themes of postcolonialism, white-cube and museum effect with a focus on the topic of museum and religion.

The term 'coloniality' is rooted in the subaltern studies and proposed by Quijano to denote the role the Western cultural hegemony plays in the modernisation of non-Western countries (Mignolo 2007). Since 'eurocentrism' is insufficient to provide a viable explanation, coloniality is expected to better clarify the interrelations between the colonial metropolises and the colonies in the social order, a system of knowledge, value and culture (Morana, Dussel, and Jaurequi 2008; Mignolo, Silverblatt, and Saldívar-hull 2011). Based mainly on the settler societies in the Americas, the notion is rarely employed to the non-settler ones in Asia. Despite the rich results of examining museum institution since like mentioned, the studies on the exhibition *per se* are limited either on the technical matters embracing visitor studies or on the education or mediation dimension facing local audiences of the hosting institutes. White-cube as a *muséographie* (exhibition design), much criticised in contemporary art, has not been explored in particular in museum studies. Referring to a predominant modern art gallery aesthetic, it in actuality was invented by Bauhaus in 1923 to 'give modernity a physical form' to show the objects in the display as 'abstract, vibrant and free from historicism' (O'Doherty 1976; Cain 2017). Although the Nazi authority condemned the Bauhaus School as degenerated, it has endorsed this *muséographie* by the *Great German Art Exhibition* at the Haus der Kunst inaugurated in

Munich in 1937. At the same time, the style is characterised by square or oblong shape space, white walls and a light source usually from the ceiling has become a standard format to present art as seen in Western Europe and North America. Thence the physical white-cube turned out to be the material ground for the understanding in art history 'context becomes content' (O'Doherty 1976, 65–86), which resonates with Derrida's 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte'¹ in literary criticism (Derrida, *Definitions Introduction, Deconstruction Deconstructing, Barthes Differences, and Foucault References* 2004) and Latour's 'medium is the message' in social sciences (Latour 2005). Furthermore, white-cube echoes with the concept of 'museum effect' firstly noticed by Malraux in the 1960s and further discussed by Alpers (Alpers 1990) in explaining that museum 'elevates' ordinary objects by giving them importance and value. This elevation (or valorisation) is also contributed by the 'gaze' of the visitor (Casey 2003). As the aesthetic inflexion given by museum can turn mundane objects into interesting things to be looked at attentively, the requirement of 'visual interest' for the exhibited objects becomes primary (Henning 2006). Besides, such 'elevating' is further fortified through museum education, as museum works to civilise (Duncan 1995) and to educate (Smith 2014) the society. In this light, displaying the religious objects of the *Other* as art in the white-cube of the museum especially in the geocultural context of the *Other* becomes problematic. In fact, an emerging study on 'museum and religions' have reflected this concern. Paine considers that the religious artefacts can fulfil their duties and turn the museum into a shrine promoting their owners' faiths (Paine 2000, 2013). Sullivan evaluates the exhibitions of Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism and studied the relationship between religion, museum and memory (Sullivan 2015). As wide as such discussions can be covering the aspects of architecture, conservation, curatorship, digital engagement and visitor studies (Buggeln, Paine, and Plate 2017), they are mostly from the perspective of museum curators and neglect the fundamental difference between museum and churches or temple as well as the connection to postcolonialism. While 'religious diversity' or 'religious pluralism' (Basinger 2015) are assumed, this research furthers the studies in reflecting on how the white-cube effect conceals or negates the original meaning of the objects in the display by 'diminishing' the religious connotation into mere philosophical thinking (Siderits 2007) or anthropological knowledge, and by 'elevating' the visual attractions into fine art aesthetics (Corbey, Layton, and Tanner 2008). While white-cube continues to dominate the museum scene, experimental exhibition design has materialised to simulate a shrine-like space for displaying Buddhist art using darker wall colour or dimmer lighting in the background. Limited religious practices also became allowed in certain exhibitions of cultures or world heritage destinations. However, the fundamental gap between secular museum (knowledge institute) and sacred temple (religious milieu) remains irreconcilable; still, and this can be crucial to the (re)vitalisation of the living religious traditions or cultures in Asia.

Although museum objects have many lives (Tythacott 2011), the milieu of exhibition predetermines their immediate identity and meaning. However, similar to a church (Farago 2015) in inviting the visitor's sacred gaze (Morgan 2005), museum endorses science, a rationalism, which as described in the feminism studies (Nhanenge 2011, 189), or the indigenous studies (Semali and Kincheloe 1999) is 'Western, white, male, bourgeois and elite'. It is in this light that the symbol or metaphor of the 'whitened' context substantiates to denote the globalisation of museum praxis and the universalisation of Western knowledge, norm and value – both together contribute to altering the social function and the ontological or epistemological understanding of the religious collections in the universal museums and especially in their 'countries of origin', the former colonies.

Methodology and scope

Traversing a vague terrain, theoretically, historically and geographically, this research uses a semi-structured comparative approach with historical methods as literature review and archive survey as well as exhibition evaluation on the general histories and presentations of MG and (selected) national museums in the 'countries of origin' of MG's collections in Asia. The exhibits of mandala statues in MG in Paris and Toji in Kyoto will be discussed to illustrate the difference between the white-cube of the

museum and the original context of the temple. The study materials include the publications of catalogue, report and virtual presentation of the museums in question. The included visuals centred around MG are to provide readers with a mediated empirical understanding on how displaying Asian religious objects as art in the white-cube of museum crystallises the heritage process of ‘whitening’ – which to the West signifies a cancelling of colonial thinking (decolonisation) and to the rest a manifestation of modernisation (a quasi-synonym of Westernisation). Knowing that decolonisation means to return the occupied land or property and to gain sovereignty and independency (Kennedy 2016), the findings will shed some new light on the argument over repatriation between universal museums and the countries of origin (Gill 2008; Cuno 2013; Peers and Brown 2005), especially when the ‘important collections’ held by the former have remained unreturned (except prioritised human remains or ethnological items) (Harris 2018; Hickley 2019), unexhibited or unstudied. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the study results will question the legitimacy of white-cube and contribute to the ongoing debate of ‘decolonising museum’ (Preciado 2014; Petrš̃in-Bachelez 2015; Tlostanova 2017) or ‘decolonising cultural heritage’ (Weiner 2016).

Transformation of Musée Guimet

Private museum of religions under orientalism in the Belle Époque

The history of Musée Guimet started from the personal collections of Émile Guimet (1836–1918) – the heir of a family business (the Pechiney) of manufacturing the ‘artificial ultramarine’. Leading a typical bourgeois life, this gentleman embodied the *zeitgeist* of the time as a composer, antiquarian (or Orientalist) and patron of the school, orchestra and theatre in the belief that art should be a potent instrument for the moral progress of advanced society. Inspired Musée Guimet in a touristic voyage to Egypt in 1865, he became interested in ‘the creators of philosophic systems’ because ‘the founders of religions’ (as Lao-Tzu, Confucius, Zoroaster, Plato, Jesus and Mahomet) had shared similar ideas and had, respectively, proposed needed social solutions (Francotte 2017). In 1873, he joined the Association of Japanese, Chinese, Tartars and Indochinese Studies and organised the very first International Congress of Orientalists, which became an important venue to share findings and exchange information and largely contributed to the ‘race of antiquities’ in Central Asia during the Great Game. In 1874, he visited Copenhagen and was impressed by the pedagogic quality of the Museum of Ethnography (Hauer 2020). In 1876, he accepted the commission from Jules Ferry, the Minister of Public Instruction of Cults and Fine Arts, and made an expedition to Japan, China and India, entailed with a scientific report and a private collection – part of which was exhibited in the 1878 *Exposition Universelle* (which was to resurrect France from the Franco-Prussian War) under the theme *Religions de l’Extrême-Orient*. At the same time, he started in Lyon to build a ‘museum of religions’ to gather ‘under the same ceiling all the gods of humankind’. By the end of 1879, the museum was inaugurated in the presence of Jules Ferry. But a few years later, the Lyon municipality cancelled the sponsorship as local visitors were little interested. Émile Guimet then proposed to move the museum to Paris with a few conditions: the new museum should have the same architecture, bear his name, make him the sole curator for life and receive an annual subsidy of 45,000 francs. In 1885, according to *la loi du 7 août*, the Deputy Chamber ratified the contract and the private MG was ‘nationalised’ into *bien national* with the State being the proprietor of the museum and the collection. In 1889, under the presence of the President of the Republic, Sadi Carnot (1837–1894), the museum was opened at *La place d’Iéna* in Paris.

National museum of art in imperialism and the postcolonial era

[...] si je me suis occupé de philosophie, si j’ai fondé le Musée des Religions, c’était pour donner aux travailleurs le moyen d’être heureux. Pour obtenir ce résultat, j’ai consulté l’histoire des civilisations, j’ai recherché dans tous les pays, quels hommes avaient voulu faire le bonheur des autres, et j’ai trouvé que c’étaient tous les fondateurs de religions.² (Beaumont 2014)

As seen in the public speech quoted above given in 1910, Émile Guimet has made it explicit that above all he regarded the religions of the *Other* as philosophies and his Museum of Religions a way to make workers happy. Since a museum of religions should be a collection of ideas (De Milloue 1900), under his curatorship pedagogic means became essential to interpret and deliver the ideas the objects embodied. In addition to financing numerous publications, he had organised several expositions of archaeological expeditions to Asia in the premises. Nevertheless, all has changed after his deceased in 1918. To 'magnify the colonial empire', the government of the Third Republic decided to turn this nationalised establishment into a museum of art. Since the museum was reestablished in Paris and attached to the *Direction des musées de France*, it began to receive similar collections from other organisations (Héron 2001), for example, the Korean collection of Charles Vrat (1842–1893), the Central Asian collections of Paul Pelliot and Édouard Chavannes (in 1927), the collection of the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan and the Tibetan collection of Jacque Bacot (1877–1965). After WWII, becoming a department to Louvre, part of a vast reorganisation of the national collections, MG continued to obtain more Asiatic artworks and give away those that were ethnographic in nature (or not qualified as high art). Becoming the very first Asian art museum in the world since then, the museum kept growing in collection and scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s a new museology was formed and the neoclassical decorations were removed. From private property to a national institute, the original goal of MG to address the public good was replaced by showing the achievements of the gone empire.

Universal museum with internationalism in the global age

Coming into the 21st century, under a general policy to consolidate the museum's role as a knowledge institute catering to an increasing public interest in Asian civilisations, a thorough renovation was initiated in the late 1990s. In consequence, the interior design was renewed as mentioned in the beginning and the Buddhist Pantheon re-furnished to display the original collections of Émile Guimet brought back from his expedition to Asia. Reopened in 2001, Musée Guimet asserted itself 'as a major centre, in the heart of Europe, for the appreciation and knowledge of Asian civilisations, while also taking into consideration the latest developments in museum science and new requirements for the display and conservation of artworks'. It is noted in its introduction that the status of GM as an art museum is 'in line with the efforts of all its previous directors and curatorial staff'. The white-cube like said was given a contemporary feature by the architects, Henri and Bruno Gaudin, to give natural lighting, reorganise the interior space and create open perspectives so that it would be easier for the visitors to grasp the interrelations and differences between the various artistic traditions in Asia. Shortly after the grand reopening, in 2002, the director of MG joined with other 17 directors of major museums in Western Europe and North America in signing the aforementioned *Declaration*, published by the British Museum, in response to Greece's demand of repatriation for the Parthenon Marbles. Like the *Declaration* claimed, MG, as a 'universal (or encyclopaedia) museum', is to preserve the cultural heritage of mankind and meant for all peoples, including those from the 'countries of origin' of its collections.

Primary museums in the countries of origin in Asia

From colonial museum to national museum after independence

A review on the histories of primary museums in the 'countries of origin' of Musée Guimet's collections in Asia reveal that: almost every single one of them (be it the first or the largest museum in the country) was built either directly by the colonial powers from the metropolises or then indirectly under their influences.

Following the path of colonisation, in the former British Empire we see that the Indian Museum (or the Imperial Museum at Calcutta) came from the Asiatic Society of Bengal created by Sir William

Jones in 1784; and the National Museum of India (New Delhi) (inaugurated in 1949) from an exhibition of Indian art and artefacts held by the Royal Academy of Arts in 1946 in London. In Sri Lanka, a national status in 1942, the Colombo National Museum was established in 1877 by the British Governor of Ceylon, Sir William Henry Gregory (1872–1877). Separated from the British India in 1937, the Myanmar (the British Berman) had the National Museum Yangon built-in 1952 to demonstrate the Burmese culture and history with folk art, buddhist art, ethnography, performing art and natural history. The National Museum (Malaysia) (opened in 1963) was based on the Selangor Museum, created by the British and Selangor government in 1898 following the formation of the Federated Malay States in 1896. In the former Dutch Empire, the National Museum of Indonesia (opened in 1950) was based on the work of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia, founded in 1778. In the influence zone of the United States, the National Museum of the Philippines came from the Insular Museum of Ethnology, Natural History, and Commerce, constructed in 1901 by the Philippine Commission (appointed by the President of the United States) and renamed in 1904 as the Bureau of Ethnological Survey (responsible for participating the Louisiana Purchase Exposition). In the former French colonial empire, the National Museum of Vietnamese History (opened in 1958) was originated from the archaeological research institution of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, created in 1908. Being part of Indochina, Laos had the Lao National Museum built in 1985 on the site of a French colonial mansion, constructed in 1925. And the National Museum of Cambodia was France's Musée National de Phnom Penh, created in 1920 based on the work of George Groslier (1887–1945). Ceded to the Cambodian government in 1951 and after the independence in 1953, it became a 'subject of bilateral accords' (not until 1966 was elected the first non-French curator). In the former Empire of Japan, the National Museum of Korea (opened in 1945) came from the Imperial Household Museum, established in 1909, and the Japanese Government General Museum, built-in 1929. In the few countries that remained (partially) independent at the time, we see that the Bangkok National Museum was founded in 1874 by King Chulalongkorn, who succeeded to modernise the country through socio-political reforms and signing concessions to the British and French empires. In China, the Nantong Museum (founded in 1905) was inspired by Japan's *National Industrial Exposition* in 1903 and the imperial museum (now the Tokyo National Museum). As to Japan (a semi-colonised country turning into a coloniser), the said national museum was created in 1872 (after the Meiji Reform in 1868) based on the exhibition prepared for participating the *Exposition Universelle* in Vienna in 1873.

Taking over the colonial museums after independence, local governments instead of overthrowing this colonial legacy, on the contrary, have retained and strengthened it by keeping the museum performance and white-cube legitimacy intact under a 'national' status – the highest level of common museum administration system within a modern state, ranging from local to municipal, provincial, regional and national, often used to showcase the country's cultural identity in principle.

world culture destination under the auspices of UNESCO-UN

After WWII, Southeast Asia became the battleground for civil wars or proxy wars between the communist and the anti-communist forces. This episode was also marked in the transition of colonial museums from the coloniser to the colonised. For instance, different names of the museum were given by different parties, the prolonged control of the museum by metropole and the propaganda use of the museum by the revolutionary authority. For socio-economic and political reasons, the archaeological interest and heritage process of local ruins have continued after the wars. To offer help, the World Heritage List was created by UNESCO as an intergovernmental platform and mechanism to link heritage protection and development work through cultural tourism, which contributed to the making of heritage diplomacy (Winter 2015).

Two prominent success stories of the UNESCO endeavours are the Mahayana Buddhist temple Borobudur in Indonesia and the Hindu-Buddhist temple complex Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Borobudur, rediscovered under the British administration by the Lieutenant Governor-General Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1814, began to attract wide attention in the West in 1885 (thanks to the study of a Dutch engineer and Chairman of the Archaeological Society in Yogyakarta) was 'safeguarded' by the Dutch East Indies government in 1900 (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2020). Yet since then prestigious Buddhist statues of the site become collector items and ended up in major Western museums, including MG. Similarly, Angkor Wat, visited by António da Madelena (a Portuguese Capuchin friar) in 1589, became known to the West via the scientific expedition of Henri Mouhot (1826–1861), a French naturalist and explorer. In 1908, the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* created the *Conservation d'Angkor* to work on the site and to 'safeguard' it until the Khmer Rouge seized the power (Glancey 2017). Like Borobudur, copious masterpieces of Angkor Wat became the permanent collections of Western museums, including and especially MG. In the post-colonial era, for Borobudur, Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany and Australia answered the call of UNESCO and signed the agreement on the *Voluntary Contribution to be Given for the Execution of the Project to Preserve Borobudur* in 1973. Similarly, Angkor Wat received support from the Archaeological Survey of India between 1986 and 1992. In 1992, it began to acquire aids from France, Japan, China and Germany for restoration, conservation and management of the heritage site as answered by UNESCO to the President's appeal. Such heritage enterprise often resulted in the making of new museums. For example, the Karmawibhanga Museum was built in 1983 inside the Borobudur Archaeological Park; the Angkor National Museum was opened in 2007, operated by the Thai Vilailuck International Holdings based in Bangkok and based on the collections loaned from the Cambodian National Museum and the said *Conservation d'Angkor* (Rowan and Baram 2004).

The whitening

Collecting the other

Ethnographic exhibition with Authenticity

To build 'an institute or laboratory which served first to illustrate teaching of founders of religions', the early exhibitions of Musée Guimet in Lyon faithfully followed Émile Guimet's idea to display authentic Asian cultures. Under the guidance of ethnography, *mise-en-scène* exhibits of religious rituals and practices are installed in Figure 1. In which, the intangible interconnection between artefacts and people (users) was manifested in a naturalistic and realistic way. Moving to Paris, in the new premises the museum applied an educative *muséographie* with packs of vitrines, scattered spotlights, walls full of photographs and paintings to explain the original objects (and duplicates) in the display (Héron 2001) Figure 2. This pedagogic method was embodied as well in the design of visiting line to simulate the spreading of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Far East. Although the interior of neo-Greek style (including a round room in dark red with Egyptian colons surrounded the panorama under the dome) has made the space dense and shady, difficult for the visitor to 'read' the objects, the pedagogical purpose of Émile Guimet for his 'museum of religions' was made prominent.

Exhibiting non-Western religious art

After the War in 1945, MG was reopened as part of Louvre, applying the *muséographie* of white-cube (Stern 1948) Figure 3. Being a museum specialised into 'art', the curatorial rationale of art history crept in (Francotte 2017). The successors of Émile Guimet were mostly art historians, for example, Stern had expertise in ancient Cambodian art, Auboyer in classic Indian art, Jarrige in Indo-Pakistan art and Frank in Japonisme. To demonstrate art, many Buddhist statues were removed from the exhibition room to the storage due to their aesthetic flaws (including the duplicates of Toji sculptures in Figure 2). At the turn of the last millennium, like said the latest version of white-cube was made with the aforementioned features: the original colour of raw material (as metal or cement), natural light, open and airy space and sparse and uncluttered display Figure 4. Making void of historical, social and cultural context,



Figure 1. Confucianism ceremony before the ancestor's portrait in Musée Guimet in Lyon (public domain).

this design philosophy appears to be identical to the one used in the boutique of high end products – which has an architecture tradition from modern department stores, emerged a century ago for the industrialised commercial society (Whitaker 2011, 7). While the boutique takes up the image of the museum to elevate its product value (Joy et al. 2014), the millenium look of MG further advances how to valorise the objects in aesthetics to the extreme as seen in the commercial gallery of contemporary art, under the category of luxury goods. Eventually, the deities of the *Other* while being an art 'abstract, vibrant and free of historicity' in a white-cube are equivalent to the commodities on the art market, considering that a gilt-bronze figure of bodhisattva today can be sold for 2,060,000 USD (Sotheby's 2019). The collections of MG are *de facto* invaluable, by all definitions to any cultures.

White-cube to erase colonial traits (decolonisation)

Behind the transformation of Musée Guimet was the development of academic subjects as anthropology, archaeology and especially art history. Institutionalisation played a decisive role in categorising into particular disciplines the objects of similar cultural contexts.

Following the expansion of European colonialism, scholarly interests on the *Other* became profuse as reflected by the early publication *Primitive Culture: Researches into The Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (Tylor 1871), in which the *Other* was regarded as 'primitive', 'savage' and 'lower race'. The scientific knowledge as such had well served



Figure 2. A mis-en-scène exhibit of the duplicates of Toji mandala in MG in Paris between 1890-1910 (MNAAG).

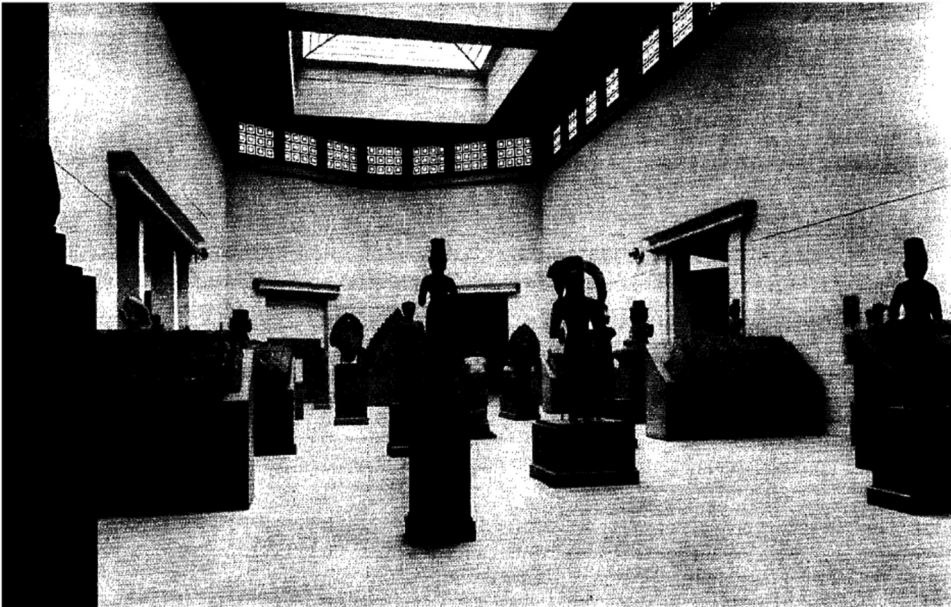


Figure 3. The white-cube of Musée Guimet in 1945 (Stern 1948, 52; © MNAAG).

the colonial governments. For example, the Russian orientalist Sergey Oldenburg (1863–1934), while gathering prestigious ethnographic collections founded the Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of the Borderlands of Russia to administer the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. It is this need that had encouraged the systematical study of the exotic objects from the princely ‘cabinet of curiosities’ to the learned



Figure 4. The white-cube of MG in 2001 (MNAAG).

societies and modern museums. Within the walls of varied knowledge institutions, the studies diverged and specialised into specific subject matters, as seen in the fact that the Royal Anthropological Institute was founded in 1867, the Royal Archaeological Institute in 1844 and the French Institute for Oriental Archaeology in 1880. In MG, simply between 1893 and 1904, a total of 180 conferences or seminars was convened to explore the history of religions (Héron 2001, 94). At the same time, the modern concept of art has taken shape. The creation of the Royal Society of Arts in 1754 marked the milestone for new ways of producing and consuming art, in response to an enlarging anonymous art market emerged for the increasing middle class of a commercial society. Art history, pioneered by Winckelmann (1717–1768), was formed by connecting historical texts and ancient Greek or Roman ruins to discussing the changing styles and national characteristics of artmaking (Kaufmann 2001). This knowledge became a backbone for categorising and classifying the colossal colonial collections from/of the *Other*, and the level of skill or technique, aesthetic sensibility and artistic feature became the criteria of ranking – a concept and mechanism often entailing a price tag. This is the unspoken side of ‘elevating’ ethnographic specimen or archaeological artefacts into art by museums. Although such principle of ranking was challenged in the discussions of ‘decolonising art history’ by non-Western cultural objects (of their systems of knowledge, methodology and value), the concept of Wittgenstein ‘family resemblance’ was suggested as a solution (Corbey, Layton, and Tanner 2008). Nevertheless, based on art history rather than ethnology, MG was spared from the said self-criticism of anthropological thinking in the post-colonial era. Eventually, art as a subject is in the knowledge category of philosophy, a transcending matter beyond any boundary of time, space and culture. One prototype for MG is Louvre, of which the royal collections after the Revolution has been displayed by the National Assembly to the common public in a systematic and chronological way, free from any significance of religion, monarchy or feudality, to demonstrate not as the aristocratic taste but as the national art belonging to all citizens.

Presenting self

The colonial understanding

In the countries of origin of MG's collections, not only the contents but also the locations of those national museums have landmarked Western colonisation. For example, cities like Calcutta (Kolkata), Batavia (Jakarta) or Hanoi were the administrative centres of colonial empires, built along the shore, convenient for shipping and transportation to the metropolises. Calcutta was the capital of British Raj (firstly known to the British East India Company in the 1690s) between 1858 and 1911 and was replaced by New Delhi as the Partition of Bengal (1905–1911) failed to segregate the Muslims from the Hindus. Consequently, it is the Indian Museum in Calcutta that holds the most complete collections of local cultures. Its 35 galleries contained the gatherings of art, archaeology, anthropology, geology, zoology and botany made by the founder-curator Nathaniel Wallich (1786–1854). A similar story exists in Indonesia. Located in Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies, the museum's 141,000 objects have covered the themes of archaeology, history, ethnography, natural history and geography – a complete guide for the Dutch Empire to comprehend their subjects of the colony. Such knowledge made by the colonisers became the self-understanding of the colonised after decolonisation.

Identical curatorship and muséographie

In addition to the knowledge system, the museum presentation of local cultures configured by management, curatorship and muséographie embodied in the white-cube has remained identical to the colonial model and proliferated. The National Museum (New Delhi) built-in 1949 modelled the Indian Museum in Calcutta with a focus in art. In Sri Lanka, the Colombo Museum was enlarged by creating branches in Jaffna, Kandy and Ratnapura based on the research of the Royal Asiatic Society. In Indonesia, the National Museum redistributed manuscripts to the National Library and artworks to the National Gallery, and had a museum boom in the 1980s. While the National Museum of Vietnamese History (based on the archaeological collection of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*) after 1958 has expanded with an added chapter on the August 1945 Revolution, the Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum built-in 1966 was dedicated to telling the country's defence with exhibition themes of martyrdom, patriotism, military strategy and overcoming enemy incursion (Lenzi 2004) **Figure 5**. In these museums, despite adding a new episode portraying the colonial empires as evil or cruel, the rest has kept intact. Going into these museums, one will be reminded of their prototypes in the West. While continuing to collect, interpret and disseminate local heritage cultures the same way as MG did (and does), they carried out the said knowledge transfer – the *Other* in the West has become the *Self* in Asia – manifested in the white-cube. This creates a paradox or conflict between the museum narratives and the living traditions (of local peoples), especially in terms of religions. In India, over 80% of the population is Hinduist. In Sri Lanka 70.2%, Myanmar 88%, Thailand 93%, Cambodia 97.9%, Laos 65%, Vietnam 85%, Japan 69.8% – and France 0.5% – are Buddhist (Iwai 2017). These statistics raise a question: how should local peoples understand the messages fabricated and delivered within-and-without the white-cube? Seeing their deities as a symbol of philosophical thinking, ethnographic specimen or fine art in Orientalism or exoticism and learning the history of religions or art as in the West? While these religious icons are not yet history, extinguished from their daily life, but the sacred and holy material mediators still conveying to the believers the original norms and value of traditional cultures. Putting these religious objects in the museum (a secular space for art and science) instead of the temple, in a way, is to deprive their cultural rights to practice their faiths.

White-cube to secularise local beliefs (colonisation/coloniality)

Although the reason for the countries of origin to continue the colonial legacy of the museum is considered as to 'demonstrate their respect for Western values and their worthiness as recipients of



Figure 5. Vietnam National Museum of Fine Art, in which local religious (Buddhist) artefacts are displayed as artworks in the white-cube to tell the national history (Wiki Commons).

Western military and economic aids' (Duncan 1995), when UNSECO proclaim that 'it is exactly these places that have the greatest difficulties and the most original museum experiences' (Baghli, Boylan, and Herreman 1998, 7); one important yet often neglected factor are that – museum represents sociocultural modernity pursued by the independent governments, especially during and in the aftermath of wars (Belting 2007). Being caught in the dilemma between modernisation and tradition, the religious artefacts in the white-cube like said provoke the biggest challenge. Not only their religious meaning and function are cancelled by the secular museum space but also their believer-visitors restrained to hold rituals or ceremonies.

A set of 21 mandala sculptures of Esoteric (Mantrayana) Buddhism at the temple Toji in Kyoto serves as an explicit example of how such objects can have different meanings given in different places by different peoples. The original statues, created in the 9th century, were believed to be designed by the monk Kukai, who went to China studying the language and culture and brought back the Esoteric Buddhism from the Huiguo Temple in Chang'an (Xian). After the Meiji Reform, religions in Japan went through a modernisation as seen in the heritage process of Buddhist temples (including the artefacts) and the establishment of modern museums. Opening to the public, said 21 statues of Toji **Figure 6** has remained as inapproachable 'gods'. Their impressive size and beauty had attracted a great interest of Émile Guimet. Incapable of acquiring the originals, he commissioned a reproduction with smaller sizes from a local craftsman and exhibited the shipped works at the *Exposition Universelle* in 1878 and in his museum of religion **Figure 2**. However, like mentioned, is regarded as a scientific specimen with aesthetic flaws, they were removed to the storage in the 1930s when the museum was restructured. They were not to see the daylight until 1991 when the Buddhist Pantheon was established in an annexe building of MG. A comparison between **Figures 2, 6 and 7** reveals the difference between the mandala statues' meaning-making in the original temple, the museum of religions and the museum of art and how the white-cube 'elevates' or 'diminishes' their value. According to the phenomenology of architecture, the space created inside a Buddhist temple (similar to church or cathedral) – tall ceiling, oversized statue put in high position – contributes to



Figure 6. Part of the original 21 mandala statues at the Toji temple in Kyoto (Wiki commons).

forming a feeling of serenity or sacredness and generating a sense of awe from the worshippers. However, the secular museum space of white-cube to mediate science and art is designed to be visitor-friendly above all. As seen in [Figure 6](#), visitors in Toji wooden temple are fenced away from the deities in a position high above behind a table to receive offerings as water, incense and flowers.³ The spotlights projected from the platform are compromised for tourists to appreciate the ‘art’ while not obstructing the practice of believers. However, in the special exhibition of MG [Figure 7](#), the audiences are encouraged to approach the objects set to be at eye level to invite a close ‘read’ under the spotlights from the ceiling. Except for a darker wall colour, it is a typical white-cube, as seen also in the Kyoto National Museum (in the region of the objects’ provenance) where the deities have come down to their audiences as art.

Conclusion and discussion

Museum is the medium is the message

The case study of Musée Guimet and its peers in Asia as reported has outlined a heritage landscape of coloniality, which further explains why it did not affect much to the ‘countries of origin’ the self-criticism of anthropological thinking in the postcolonial era (Clifford 1988) entailing the name change of Western museums or exhibitions from ‘ethnology’ to ‘world cultures (or civilisations)’ – although this resonates a familiar tone to the evolvement of MG from ‘religions’ to ‘art’ (and ‘knowledge’). In the museum world as such, it seems that decolonisation (meaning returning the occupied land or property or gaining sovereignty and independency) is treated subtly through ‘discourse’ – how to call the name and see the object – in instead of repatriation. The muséographie of white-cube performs a conceptual or ideological decolonisation in the West by washing away the colonial traces and making the objects in display ‘abstract, vibrant and free of historicity’ to replace the often racist or biased view of ethnographic exhibitions (Conklin 2013) by the transcultural



Figure 7. The duplicates of the 21 mandala statues in a special exhibition in 2019 at MG in Paris (MNAAG). Note, in the temple (Figure 6) visitors are fenced away and looking upwards to the objects in display, yet in the museum (Figure 7) they can approach the objects in display easily and have a close 'read' at around the eye level.

aesthetic sensibility of art exhibitions. However, in the countries of origin, it represents a cultural colonisation as it retains, endorses and continues the colonial identification, categorising and interpretation of local cultures and traditions. The museum effect being maximised and amplified by white-cube, while works to 'elevate' ethnographic specimen into art also 'diminishes' religious objects into art or historical artefacts arbitrarily. Besides, the social functions of the museum are to civilise and educate the citizens. This notion resonates with Emile Guimet's idea to provide a way (exhibiting philosophies) for the blue-collar workers to be happy. It is in this light that the globalisation of museum praxis and heritage enterprise is taken as a 'civilising mission' (Falser 2011). Nevertheless, this view unwelcomingly echoes with the outdated imperialist idea, as described by Verges (Verges 2014) that it was the (French) Republican duty to 'colonise, educate and guide' the *Other*, equivalent to the 'primitive, savage and lower races'.

Decoloniality and museum praxis

As globalisation has gathered paces, the debate over repatriation between universal museums and the countries of origin became heated. But what does it signify to change the exhibition milieu of the important collections in question from one white-cube to another? Considering the phenomenon of museum coloniality, repatriation seems to be a power struggle of (inter-) national politics and economics rather than recovering the cultural rights (or identities) of local peoples. It prompts new 'heritage game' (Peacock and Rizzo 2008) and has less to do with preserving the living religious traditions – the core part of a culture. While the discussion of 'decolonising museum' or 'decolonising cultural heritage' is emerging, covering the topics of the curatorial process, exhibition narrative, museum history or design (Preciado 2014; Petršín-Bachelez 2015; Tlostanova 2017), the fundamental paradox between museum and temple (between science and religion) in Asia (or the non-Western worlds) remains to be unnegotiable still. However, similar a museum can be to a shrine or altar

(Roberts 2017) or church, it is dedicated to secular scientific knowledge with a specific mission, etiquette and code of ethics. *De facto*, the museum is not temple or church by nature, and it cannot (yet?) Close the doors upon reservation for believers to hold authentic rituals or ceremonies as seen in some cathedrals in France or Italy (or temples in Japan).

Besides, it is noticed that the social value of non-Western cultural heritage is often ignored or diminished as 'authenticity' by those international conventions or charters, born out of a disenchanting worldview, and evolved from the Protestant Reformation towards nationalism and secularism. Such a 19th century doctrine ensconces all societies at various stages along a ladder leading to modern civilisation represented by North-Western Europe (Byrne 2014). This observation is germane to the postcolonialism of entangled history (Bauck and Maier 2013), yet little reflected in museum studies. While colonialism needs to be re-examined (Eckert 2016), the phenomenon of museum coloniality deserves more understanding. In addition, the findings of this research contribute to challenging the legitimacy of white-cube, especially in terms of the religious objects of the *Other* that are still 'alive' in local cultures. As Byrne suggested, modernity should differ from place to place, and the inadequacy should be reconsidered of those charters composed with presumptuous and naïve terms at the (inter-)national level for rich research data of history and anthropology that detail the complex reality of people's interaction with heritage was not consulted or referenced (Byrne 2014). What can be the alternative? How to delink or decoloniality in the museum? To bridge the gaps between museum and temple (as knowledge and religious institution)?

Signs are shown for a possible change as 1) the white-cube aesthetics are being challenged by contemporary art critique (Birkett 2012), 2) experimental exhibition design applied in museums to simulate a temple-like atmosphere, and 3) limited religious practices allowed in heritage destination (for example, Angkor Wat) and local museum (as in the National Museum of Cambodia). Whereas Byrne exploits the posthumanism prevailed in digital humanities for a philosophical reconciliation between the scientific heritage process and 'the belief in the supernatural' (Byrne 2019), it is worth further contemplating how to carry out the idea of 'religious diversity' or 'religious pluralism' within-and-without the white-cube of the museum (other than the need to revise the standard definition of 'museum') (Raposo 2019) – which may be indispensable should cultural diversity play an essential role for better heritage futures.

Notes

1. In English: There is nothing outside the text.
2. In English: if I was into philosophy, if I founded the Museum of Religions, it was to give the workers the means to be happy. To achieve this result, I consulted the history of civilisations. I researched in all countries, those men who had wanted to make others happy, and I found that they were all the founders of religions.
3. The table for offering is not clear in the Fig 6, but can be seen in other photos and has been spotted by the author during a field trip made on the 5 September 2019.

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