

HEW LOCKE

JJ Charlesworth, *Hew Locke: a maverick yet moving take on the British Museum's colonial legacy*, The Telegraph, 15 October 2024



Hew Locke, *The Watchers*. Credit: Hew Locke.

Since many museums in Britain have spent the last few years tearing themselves up over whether they should continue to show objects in their collections or return them to where they came from, you'd think that the British Museum's latest attempt to address the legacies of its past would be another ponderous lecture about colonialism and empire. Luckily, what have we here? isn't told from the Museum's perspective; it's the brainchild of Guyanese-British artist Huw Locke. While Locke is unflinchingly curious about objects from the collection that evidence Britain's colonial and imperial past, his personable and reflective commentary – popping up as yellow wall texts around the 'official' labels – and his eye for unexpected visual connections, make this a maverick and often moving take on questions that have recently become all too polarised and entrenched.

With more than 200 objects displayed in a continuous run of chipboard illuminated cases – a nod to the museum's storage crates and hidden basements, and to the 'wunderkammer' (cabinet of curiosities) origins of Western museums – the show winds from Charles II's institution of slavery through to the last years of Victorian and Edwardian Empire. And although Locke's project turning a 'critical eye' on the museum's colonial legacy, it is also curious about the historical and moral ambiguities that disappear in today's climate of museum

mea culpa. For instance, of four glittering gold Asante 'soul discs', three were part of the gold paid by the defeated Asante ruler to the British in 1874; the other was given as a diplomatic gift in 1817. Where in the end, should these objects remain?

And there are stranger objects that speak of the shifting balance of power between Europeans and colonised societies; the large bronze figures brandishing rifles, made by Edo artists, are of Portuguese soldiers, mercenaries in the employ of Benin's Oba. Stocky and assured, they're symbols of the Oba's power, and of the growing importance of firepower. These examples of hybridity, exchange and entanglement fascinate Locke. There's a moral here, of course, about equitable encounters versus domination. In a cabinet modelled on ethnographic displays of weapons, Locke has placed a gold-hilted Sudanese sword (its blade made in Europe) next to the smug, gleaming brass barrel of a British Maxim machine gun. Once force became the rule, the ruled only had rebellion left, as Locke's focus on documents of colonial rebellions attests.

Meanwhile, economic power is the subject of Locke's own contributions here, paintings made on bond and share certificates of long-gone industries and empires: a £50 share in the Steel Corporation of Bengal is

overpainted with the portrait of Jamshedji Tata, the 19th-century Indian founder of Tata Steel, surrounded by leaping jaguars of the Jaguar car company. Tata now owns Jaguar and much of UK steelmaking. “Empires fall,” we hear Locke muse in disembodied snippets that issue from hanging speakers, while Locke’s sculptural figures, ‘The Watchers’, dressed in costumes made up of images found in the show, look down on us from the cases, hands reaching towards us, not accusing but asking. what have we here? doesn’t balk at reminding us where we’ve been, but, unlike too much ‘decolonial’ rhetoric, it leaves open the door to who ‘we’ are, and where we might go from here.