

# *Situated Museums? Scottish galleries and the decolonisation debate.*

by Fedra Benoli

This article analyses two exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum Dundee (V&A Dundee) and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh (SNPG) as they relate to the discourse around decolonisation.<sup>1,2,3</sup> This discourse, increasingly gaining traction in the British museum sector, investigates the effects of colonialism and its dissolution. These have impacted all aspects of society, and in the case of museums, their agency as knowledge producers and bearers of national identity has been investigated in order to understand how they contribute to the perpetuation or dismantling of colonialism. Scottish museums represent a unique case within this larger issue, as their imperial legacy remains to be thoroughly explored. Furthermore, their stakes in Scottish national identity and relationship to the United Kingdom as a whole has put them at the forefront of British politics.

To motivate and guide my analysis, I propose a theoretical framework drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges,"<sup>4</sup> postcolonial theory and museology. In her 1988 essay, Haraway defines "situated knowledges" as the alternative to objectivity, which she regards as unachievable given the hegemonic nature of male-dominated Western knowledge production.<sup>5</sup> The claim to objectivity of the knowledge stemming from this very system is what Haraway terms as the "god trick,"<sup>6</sup> the idea that looking at things "from above"<sup>7</sup> will be more fruitful in achieving knowledge. Haraway argues that this mindset makes the process of knowledge-acquisition unaccountable and ultimately false.<sup>8</sup> Understandings produced from a "positioned reality" on the other hand, acquired by "views from somewhere,"<sup>9</sup> thus fostering a "collective subject position"<sup>10</sup> are fundamental for the production of accountable, "situated knowledges."<sup>11</sup> The partial perspective through which we produce knowledge must thus be recognised. I, therefore, must address my situatedness as an Italian, white woman, a leftist and an intersectional feminist.<sup>12</sup> Not laying open these influences in my perspective would render me unaccountable, unassailable and consequently flaw the knowledge I am producing. As for the exhibitions, their positioning is analysed thoroughly, and it is fundamental for similar reasons.

Museums, which have historically been educational tools for the "democratisation of art,"<sup>13</sup> should also be accountable, honest and transparent in their positioning. When engaged by postcolonial theory, they are perceived in different terms within what Okwui Enwezor has called the "post-colonial constellation."<sup>14</sup> This concept encompasses the web of entanglements that constitute modern culture as being significantly influenced by the legacy of colonialism. Within this larger system, the "self-authorising"<sup>15</sup> presence of museums, which gives them the liberty of determining what is considered art, plays a role in the building of a collective identity. Museums are also complicit in the system of coloniality, being objects

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Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Autumn 1988, pp. 575-599.

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Haraway 1988, p. 576.

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Haraway 1988, p. 582.

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Haraway 1988, p. 589. and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, in: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Autumn 1988, pp. 575-599.

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Haraway 1988, p. 582.

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Haraway 1988, p. 590.

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Haraway 1988, p. 590. and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, in: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Autumn 1988, pp. 575-599.

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Haraway 1988, p. 590.

12

This is 'self-identification', which still is not the most accountable form of positioning, according to Haraway 1988 p. 586.

13

Philip Fisher, *Art and the Future's Past*, in: Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums*, Cambridge, MA 1991, pp. 3-29. *Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Autumn 1988, pp. 575-599.

14

Okwui Enwezor, *The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition*, in: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2003 pp. 57-82.

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Enwezor 2003, p. 63.



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Kengo Kuma and Associates, V&A Dundee Museum, opened September 2018.



3

Robert Rowand Anderson, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, opened in 1889.

of reverence that contributed to the establishment of Western hegemony.<sup>16</sup> As of now, these aspects, investigated by postcolonial theory, have still not been assimilated by international institutions and overarching bodies.<sup>17</sup>

Since it opened its doors to the wider public in 1852, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) has been fundamental in shaping the modern museum.<sup>18</sup> The newly opened V&A Dundee was very clear in its initial publication about the institution's aim of creating a "third place"<sup>19</sup> not centred on "looking at design,"<sup>20</sup> but rather offering a "communal"<sup>21</sup> and "shared"<sup>22</sup> space for doing any kind of activity. The V&A Dundee is, therefore, framed as "A Living Room for the City", where the Scottish Design collection is tucked away into a far corner while the shop, restaurant and bar take up bigger spaces. According to the V&A Dundee, the museum of the future is a communal space where you can buy books, a coffee, or cocktails. The V&A Dundee, like all state-run museums, has the privilege of representing a supposedly undefined "we", therefore projecting an aura of neutrality and non-partisanship.<sup>23</sup> In this vein, Clelia Pozzi has criticised national museums for silencing the perspectives of minorities.<sup>24</sup> These effects are, however, not addressed by the museum, which fashions itself as the latest version of the museal experience. Moreover, the V&A has been criticised for its director's stance against the restitution of stolen artefacts to formerly colonised nations.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast with the novelty of the V&A Dundee, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh is a historical museum, founded in 1889 by John Ritchie Findlay. Its purpose has been the celebration of the Scottish identity, which is represented in renditions of influential Scots.<sup>26</sup> Institutions such as the SNPG find themselves in the middle of the decolonisation debate not so much for the origin of their artworks, but owing to the personalities hung on their walls. This is at the very root of the exhibition *The Remaking of Scotland. Nation, Migration and Globalisation 1760-1860*, a long-term display of portraits from the permanent collection selected for their affinity to Scottish innovation and progress.<sup>27</sup> This exhibition, though, does not simply look to celebrate great Scots and their achievements but draws the curtain of whitewashed history to reveal the controversial lives of the figures portrayed.

Understanding the museum as inherently controlled, biased and resulting out of consciously made decisions is fundamental for the extrapolation of an exhibition's narrative.<sup>28</sup> The *Scottish Design Galleries* at the V&A Dundee constitute the permanent collection of the new museum.<sup>29</sup> Occupying the smallest space, they represent a staggering contrast to the airy and bright halls of the building. The display is modern and eccentric, apparently not adhering to a clear rhyme or reason. Given the sensibility of the garments to light, the lighting is extremely dimmed.<sup>30</sup> Interactivity with the exhibition is provided for by touchscreens and riddles for younger visitors. By contrast *The Remaking of Scotland* is more traditionalist, displaying paintings hung on mellow-coloured walls, busts on pedestals and objects in glass and timber display-cases. Both exhibitions are small but packed full of exhibits and the visitor takes a long time to go through them. They are celebrations of the establishment of Scotland as a global player from the 18th Century onwards.<sup>31</sup>

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Walter D. Mignolo, *The Decolonial Option*, in: Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham 2018, p. 105-244. 'Decoloniality' is not dissimilar to what Enwezor theorises as Postcoloniality but is preferred by the newer scholarship chiefly interested in the Americas from the fifteenth century onwards. See: Gurinder K. Bhambra, *Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues*, in: *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2014, pp. 115-121.

17

Zachary Small, *A New Definition of 'Museum' Sparks International Debate*, in: *Hyperallergic*, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2019, URL <https://hyperallergic.com/513858/icom-museum-definition/> (24.11.19).

18

Charles Saumarez Smith, *Museum, Artefacts and Meaning*, in: Peter Vergo, *New Museology*, London 1989, pp. 6-21.

19

V&A Dundee, Sophie McKinlay [ed.], *A Living Room for the City*, London 2018, p. 43.

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V&A Dundee 2018, p. 43.

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V&A Dundee 2018, p. 43.

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V&A Dundee 2018, p. 43.

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Smith 1989, p.17.

24

Clelia Pozzi, *Museums as Agonistic Spaces*, in: Luca Basso Peressut, Francesca Lanz and Genaro Postiglione, *European Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Setting the Framework*, Vol. 1, Milan 2013, pp. 7-15.

25

Tristram Hunt, *Should museums return their colonial artefacts?*, in: *The Guardian*, 29.6.2019, URL: [www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jun/29/should-museumsreturn-their-colonial-artefacts](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jun/29/should-museumsreturn-their-colonial-artefacts) (26.11.19).

26

Duncan Thomson, *A History of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery*, Edinburgh 2011, p. 14.

27

SNPG, *The Remaking of Scotland*, exhibition announcement, URL: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/exhibition/remaking-scotland-nation-migration-globalisation-1760-1860> (24.11.19).

28

Tiina Roppola, *Designing the Museum Visitor Experience*, New York 2012, p. 12.

29

Most exhibits come from the South Kensington Collection, while others are private loans.

30

Jane Robinson and Tuula Pardoe, *An Illustrated Guide to the Care of Costume and Textile Collections*, London 2000, p.36.

31

Andrew Mackillop, *Dundee, London and the Empire in Asia*, in: Charles McKean, Bob Harris and Christopher A. Whatley, *Dundee: Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Dundee 2009, pp. 160-181.

This was mainly thanks to the “gamble”<sup>32</sup> made by Scots in signing the Act of Union in 1707 that granted access to the resources of the British Empire, soon making Scotland heavily reliant on the West and East India Companies.<sup>33</sup>

In the V&A, the display of objects tied to colonialism is suggestive of wider narratives within postcolonial theory. One instance of this is the Paisley shawl manufactured by John Morgan, which “imitates pines and sprig motifs of Indian Kashmir shawls,”<sup>34</sup> and is representative of the successful textile industry in Paisley during the 19th century.<sup>35</sup> This Scottish village responded to the trend of high-quality shawls, made in Kashmir with the wool of sheep living in the Himalayas that was brought to Europe by the East India Company, and invested in the production of lower-quality reiterations of the traditionally male garment.<sup>36</sup> The symbolism of the patterns, representing fruitfulness as the “shoot of the date palm,”<sup>37</sup> can be traced back to Chaldea (Babylon) and to Indo-Persian art (“*buta*” or “*boteh*”, meaning flower).<sup>38</sup> The laborious needle technique and the material were omitted by the manufacturers to produce more cost- and time-efficient products.<sup>39</sup> The iconographic background is not mentioned in the exhibition, thus reproducing the significant cultural silencing that lay underneath the success of the Paisley industry and resulted in these shawls taking the name of the village. Naming the shawls after the town that happened to produce a “knock-off” for less than a century ties into the “European gaze”<sup>40</sup> that determined the taxonomy of non-Western entities. This is an example of the appropriation and consequent simplification of non-Western objects by Western agents to be made appealing to the Western customer.<sup>41</sup>

Another object exemplary of this is the transfer-printed earthenware produced in Glasgow, which imitated native motifs of Southeast Asia and was sold in that same market as wholesale.<sup>42,43</sup> This practice had opposite aims, appealing to the native, colonised market rather than the European customer.<sup>43</sup> The manufacturers in Glasgow – chiefly J. & M.P. Bell – combined the “exotic”<sup>44</sup> tastes of China, Japan and Indonesia with the two-colour print technique – rarely used in Scotland – representing dragons and other creatures and registering the pattern with foreign names, such as rice plates decorated with the “Makassar” pattern, named after the capital of South Sulawesi.<sup>45,46</sup> Constituting 40 percent of all wares produced by Bell by 1881, these and other patterns were registered by local toponymic names in the Patent Office in London, something that was not deemed necessary for products designed for the domestic and European market.<sup>47</sup> Thus something of a monopoly was created, which stopped the locals of the places that originally inspired these patterns to continue producing them.

These two examples show how the *Scottish Design Galleries* do not shy away from exhibiting Scottish designs that were involved in colonialism’s hegemony but fail to account for the dynamics that allowed for such objects to become iconic for Scottish heritage. Visiting the exhibition, one would garner only the positive aspects of Scottish design history. Holding the visitors’ attention by way of almost over-stimulating them is a priority and the texts mostly engage with the design qualities, therefore avoiding a positioning.

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Gordon T. Stewart, *The Strange Case of Jute*, in: Bryan S. Class and John M. MacKenzie, *Scotland Empire and Decolonisation in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester 2015, pp. 65-85.

Carla Sassi, *Acts of (Un)Willed Amnesia: Dis/Appearing Figurations of the Caribbean in Post-Union Scottish Literature*, in: Giovanna Covi, Joan Anim-Addo, Velma Pollard, and Carla Sassi, *Caribbean-Scottish Relations: Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language and Literature*, London 2007, pp. 131-98.

33

Stewart 2015, p. 65.

34

Exhibition Label for T.229-1982.

36

Valerie Reilly, *The Paisley Pattern*, Glasgow 1987, p. 7.

37

Reilly 1987, p. 10.

38

Reilly 1987, p. 11.

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Reilly 1987, pp. 10-15.

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Catherine Walsh, *Decoloniality in/as Praxis*, in: Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham 2018, pp. 15-102.

41

Adam Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism. Dress, Textiles and Culture from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London 2013, p. 57.

43

Graeme Cruickshank, *South-East Asia; A Major Destination for British Transferware*, in: *Transferware Collectors Club Articles*, URL: [https://www.transcollectorsclub.org/resources/Cruickshank\\_EDITED\\_Article.pdf](https://www.transcollectorsclub.org/resources/Cruickshank_EDITED_Article.pdf) (15.2.20), p.3.

44

Cruickshank, p. 6.

46

Connie Rogers, *Transfer-Printed Rice Plates for the South-East Asia Market*, in: *Transferware Collectors Club, Debate Discoveries, Contribution 17*, January 2015, URL: [www.transferwarecollectorsclub.org](http://www.transferwarecollectorsclub.org) (7.11.19), p. 2.

47

G. R. Dalgleish, *Scotland’s oriental links: Scottish pottery in South East Asia*, in: Royal Museum of Scotland, Jenni Calder [ed.], *The Enterprising Scot. Scottish Adventure and Achievement*, Edinburgh 1986, pp. 108-113.



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John Morgan (manufacturer) William Eadie (designer), Shawl, made in Paisley, ca. 1845, woven, V&A Dundee Scottish Design Galleries, T.229-1982.



42

J. & M.P. Bell & Co. Ltd (manufacturer), Plate with 'Buah Nanas' pattern, 1888, made in Glasgow, transfer-printed earthenware, diameter 25.5cm, height 4.4 cm, V&A Dundee, Scottish Design Galleries, C.85-2007.

The viewer is “god-tricked,”<sup>48</sup> and the misconception of the museum as neutral – which, according to Catherine Walsh, is one of the precepts that needs to be changed in order to construct a decolonial perspective in knowledge production<sup>49</sup> – is perpetuated.

The SNPG’s *The Remaking of Scotland* starts with a text that addresses how the period of transition from the end of the Jacobite rebellion up until 1860 resulted in a shift of the role of Scotland worldwide but that it came “at a great cost,” leading to “a legacy that we [...] are still struggling to manage and understand.”<sup>50</sup> The exhibition thus looks to analyse a century when the Scottish diaspora moved beyond Europe, motivated by the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment, which can be seen as contradictory to the colonial practices of that time.<sup>51</sup> The movement’s preoccupation with philosophical moralism notwithstanding, its wide set of currents could both justify colonial practices or find them indefensible, depending on whether its principles of utilitarianism or moral righteousness are emphasised.<sup>52</sup> In the exhibition, there are examples of depictions of slave owners like Sir Archibald Alison, an adamant defender of slavery, and Robert Cunninghame Graham of Gartmore, a figure that profited from slavery but who later as Whig MP presented himself as a defender of human rights.<sup>53</sup>

The portrait of Graham by Henry Raeburn was bequeathed by the family to the SNPG in 1984; it was described by Raeburn himself as “one of the best I have done”<sup>54</sup> and depicts the nobleman in the vestiges of the poet, holding a book and looking at the viewer<sup>55</sup>. Raeburn, who was endearingly called “Doughty Deeds” by his family and Robert Burns, travelled to Jamaica to become a slave owner, having what the gallery describes as “liaisons” with slave women, resulting in children which he referred to as “a motley variegated race of different complexions”.<sup>56</sup> This part of Graham’s biography is reported by his descendant R. B. Cunninghame Graham in a tone mostly sympathetic with his intentions.<sup>57</sup> Graham was long considered a positive figure in the history of British politics and his portrait was loaned to 10 Downing Street during Margaret Thatcher’s premiership.<sup>58</sup> Today displayed amongst other individuals involved in the Caribbean slave trade, it addresses the relationship of Scotland and the West Indies, a topic often ignored due to what Carla Sassi has called “acts of (un)willed amnesia.”<sup>59</sup> Given that the history of Scottish slave ownership became obscured after abolition, it demarcates the ignorance around this issue. The period of silence between 1833 up until the 1990s did not mean an end to Scottish activity in the West Indies, for the sugar industry continued to be extremely widespread even after abolition.<sup>60</sup> The newest scholarship has also sought to investigate the role of Scotland in imperialism specifically, because, according to T.M. Devine, a considerable amount of literature around “British” imperialism only considers England.<sup>61</sup> This elision of the Scottish imperial experience becomes more significant when approaching the role colonialism played in “cultural self-representation,”<sup>62</sup> something that has been investigated to a greater extent in regards to the English.

Scottish colonial history has been misrepresented in the past, when a national narrative developed that saw the context of the Scottish presence in Jamaica to be circumstantial,

48

Haraway 1988, p. 582.

49

Walsh 2018, p. 28.

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SNPG, Introductory text of the *Remaking of Scotland Exhibition*, 2018.

51

Thomas N. Tyson and David Oldroyd, *Accounting for slavery during the Enlightenment: Contradictions and interpretations*, in: *Accounting History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 Special Issue: *Accounting History and the Enlightenment*, 2019, pp. 212-235.

52

Tyson and Oldroyd 2019, p. 213.

53

Michael Morris, *Don Roberto on Doughty Deeds; or Slavery and Family History in the Scottish Renaissance*, in: Carla Sassi and Silke Stroh, *Empires and Revolutions. Cunninghame Graham & his Contemporaries*, Glasgow 2017, pp. 47-63.

54

Exhibition Label of PG 2620.

56

Adam Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism. Dress, Textiles and Culture from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London 2013, p. 57.

57

Graeme Cruickshank, *South-East Asia; A Major Destination for British Transferware*, in: *Transferware Collectors Club Articles*, URL: [https://www.transcollectorsclub.org/resources/Cruickshank\\_EDITED\\_Article.pdf](https://www.transcollectorsclub.org/resources/Cruickshank_EDITED_Article.pdf) (15.2.20), p.3.

58

Cruickshank, p. 6.

59

Connie Rogers, *Transfer-Printed Rice Plates for the South-East Asia Market*, in: *Transferware Collectors Club, Debate Discoveries, Contribution 17*, January 2015, URL: [www.transferwarecollectorsclub.org](http://www.transferwarecollectorsclub.org) (7.11.19), p. 2.

60

G. R. Dalglish, *Scotland’s oriental links: Scottish pottery in South East Asia*, in: Royal Museum of Scotland, Jenni Calder [ed.], *The Enterprising Scot. Scottish Adventure and Achievement*, Edinburgh 1986, pp. 108-113.

61

Thomas Martin Devine, *Recovering Scotland’s Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*, Edinburgh 2015, pp. 226-227.

62

Robert Young, *White Mythologies. Writing Histories and the West*, New York and London 1990, p. 175.



45

J. & M.P. Bell & Co. Ltd (manufacturer), Plate with 'Makassar' pattern, 1890, made in Glasgow, transfer-printed earthenware, diameter 19 cm, height 3.4 cm, V&A Dundee, Scottish Design Galleries, C.88-2007.



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Sir Henry Raeburn, Robert Cunninghame Graham of Gartmore, d. 1797, poet and politician, ca. 1794, oil on canvas, 128.5x103.5 cm, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, The Remaking of Scotland, PG 2620.

imposed on them by the Acts of Union (1707) and the battle of Culloden (1746), events that were seen as a disruption of national Scottish history.<sup>63</sup> Michael Morris sketches three trends that motivate the unwillingness of some Scots to accept their role in colonialism: "temporal distancing,"<sup>64</sup> which sees the facts of slavery as historically distant and thus irrelevant; "equivalent victimhood,"<sup>65</sup> emphasising the past hardships of Scotsmen, for instance the Highland Clearances; and lastly an attempt to "relativize slavery"<sup>66</sup> with the sufferings of the Scottish working class. However, the University of Glasgow in 2018 has published a report admitting the role in slavery of a considerable number of their alumni and staff – among them Robert Cunninghame Graham.<sup>67</sup>

*The Remaking of Scotland* also includes artworks that highlight different experiences of the Enlightenment beyond military and colonial careers in the Companies. Example of this is the portrait of Elizabeth Hamilton, also by Raeburn (c. 1812)<sup>68</sup>, a writer famous for her moralist, satirical accounts of Indian and British culture that stemmed both from Romantic orientalism and feminism.<sup>69</sup> In her fictional account, she openly criticises the limited role of women in British society at the time and underlines the "danger of making blanket generalisations about other cultures."<sup>70</sup> The link between Indian and British culture is also evident in the George Willison portrait of Mohammed Ali Khan Walejah, Nawab of the Carnatic (1777)<sup>71</sup>. The governor, who was an ally of the East India Company, is dressed in traditional clothes, but the surrounding architecture is European and reminiscent of typical depictions of powerful leaders. *The Remaking of Scotland* as it has been sketched so far, is rooted in the contradictory tensions that constitute Scottish heritage today. The display, which at first glance comes across as a gallery of mostly white, noble, rich men, offers a multi-dimensional account of the century following the end of the Jacobite cause, laying the facts for the visitor to interpret and decide on their own. Even if the exhibition does not proclaim an explicit stance, the visitor is at least presented with the most vital facts. There has been however a critique of the exhibition for its complete omission of the Highland Clearances.<sup>72</sup> This shows that even if an exhibition seems to be extremely honest, not hesitating to show controversial topics, it can still silence other stories.

In the SNPG's exhibition, there is a development towards a more nuanced account of the Scottish Enlightenment that is responsive to the decolonial debate. The only suitable strategy decided by the gallery for the reframing of these figures is through the label texts, which according to Tony Bennett represent the bridge between the "visible" and "invisible"<sup>73</sup> in art museums. The text is thus the tool most suitable for conveying meanings that are not explicit to the visitor. Throughout the establishment of the SNPG's collection, each portrait was representative of iconic and role-model-like figures of Scottish heritage.<sup>74</sup> In the case of *The Remaking of Scotland*, the celebratory nature of the depictions is, therefore, contrasted with the questionable behaviours described in the label texts.

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Michael Morris, *Scotland and the Caribbean, c. 1740-1833: Atlantic Archipelagos*, New York, 2015, pp. 6-7.

64

Morris 2015, p. 28.

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Morris 2015, p. 28.

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Morris 2015, p. 28.

67

Stephen Mullen and Simon Newman, *Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow. Report and recommendations of the University of Glasgow History of Slavery Steering Committee*, September 2018, URL: [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_607547\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_607547_smxx.pdf) (20.11.19), p. 7.

69

Susan B. Taylor, *Feminism and Orientalism in Elizabeth Hamilton's 'Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah'*, in: *Women's Studies*, Vol. 29, 2000, pp. 555-581. See as well Elizabeth Hamilton, *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, Boston 1819.

70

Nigel Leask, *Elizabeth's Hamilton's 'Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah' and Romantic Orientalism*, in: Heather Glen and Paul Hamilton, *Repossessing the Romantic Past*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 183–202.

72

Martin Hannan, *National Galleries' exhibition on Scots migration omits Clearances*, in: *The National*, 2.8.19, URL: <https://www.thenational.scot/news/17810855.national-galleries-39-exhibitions-scots-migration-omits-clearances/> (11.11.19). The Highland Clearances caused many lower-class Scots to lose their terrains and homes, resulting in extreme poverty and mass-emigration. Devine recounts this traumatic event in Scottish national history in: T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Clearances. A History of the Dispossessed. 1600-1900*, London, 2018.

73

Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, theory, politics*, Oxon 1995, p. 164. 2013, p. 57.

74

Thomson, 2011, p. 14.





68

Sir Henry Raeburn, Elizabeth Hamilton, 1757-1816. Writer and educationalist, ca.1812, oil on canvas, 88.8 x 69.8 cm (unframed), Scottish National Portrait Gallery, The Remaking of Scotland, PG 1486.



71

George Willison, Mohamed Ali Khan Walejah, 1717-1795. Nawab of the Carnatic, 1777, oil on canvas, 236.2 x 146 cm, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, The Remaking of Scotland, PG 2959.

Looking at the exhibition strategies, the *Scottish Design Galleries* at the V&A seem to be more distant from the decolonisation debate by comparison. However, the museum has engaged the scholarly discourse by hosting a workshop in August 2019 by the Transnational Scotland Project, which offered an arena for the discussion of the colonial ties as present within the *Scottish Design Galleries*.<sup>75</sup> It is also important to underline that the V&A Dundee is a new museum that, although it has been widely criticised, nonetheless offers a new cultural arena for Dundee, a city that has been invested in an effort to establish itself as a city of culture for Scotland.

This analysis of two Scottish galleries has sought to unfurl the entanglements represented by objects displayed in the context of the museum, a dynamic and ever-changing institution. It has, however, only afforded a glimpse into the decolonial debate, a topic of increasing importance that has been gaining media, political and cultural attention. This shows how important these discussions are not only for individuals directly linked to the museum industry but also for the wider public. In the context of national identity, the objects present in both exhibitions discussed are invested with a significance. This significance is based on the idea that objects of our past are representative of a trajectory connected with ourselves as present subjects.<sup>76</sup> This idea is deeply embedded in both the V&A and SNPG exhibitions. Museums, formerly space- and time-machines engaged only in the conservation of the past, are now perceived as political agents that cannot afford to be disengaged from their context. Revealing the partial perspective that museums offer in their situatedness is just the first step towards a more accomplished decolonialisation of this institution.

## 75

Transnational Scotland Project, *Transnational Scotland's Second Workshop at the V&A Dundee*, URL: <https://transnationalscotland.wordpress.com/news-and-workshops/blog-post-transnational-scotlands-second-workshop-at-the-va-dundee/> (24.11.19).

## 76

Donald Preziosi, *Myths of Nationality*, in: Simon J. Knell et. al., *National Museums. New Studies from Around the World*, London and New York 2011, pp. 55-66.