

Exhibiting History

Activity

Oliver Godsmark and Kathleen McIlvenna

This is a seminar plan for a source-focused session lasting 50 minutes and focused on the subject of ‘Cabinets of Curiosity’. The session is aimed at second- or third-year undergraduate history students with some understanding of (a) the period 1600–1800, (b) the history of museums and collections and, ideally, (c) histories of knowledge-making.

Context and aim

This seminar activity uses King Prempeh’s miniature stool, an object of extra-European provenance displayed within ‘Objects of Love, Hope and Fear: A World Collection’ at Derby Museum and Art Gallery, to explore how we might exhibit material culture with contentious histories to public audiences. After the session, students will have:

- Analysed how the object is situated as part of the current collection;
- Established the specific historical circumstances that shaped the object’s individual trajectory from Asante, part of modern-day Ghana in West Africa to Derby, a city in the East Midlands of England;
- Considered contemporary demands for reparative/restitutive justice in the context of colonial looting;
- Offered critical commentary on the current museum label for the object.

By considering how objects are labelled and exhibited as part of wider collections, students will better understand the subjectivity of museum interpretation and the difficulties in articulating historical complexity to diverse

public audiences. These exercises also encourage students to reflect on the significance and ongoing legacies of global connections fostered under unequal colonial relations, particularly as they apply to historical objects and collections from Africa now located in the contemporary museums of the Global North.

Preparation

Students should engage with the following materials in the order in which they are listed:

Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto, 2020), pp. 1–24.

Robert Baden-Powell, *The Downfall of Prempeh: A Diary of Life with the Native Levy in Ashanti, 1895–1896* (London: Methuen & Co., 1900), pp. 6–11, 42–45: <http://www.thedump.scoutscan.com/prempeh.pdf> (accessed 8 August 2025).

‘Objects of Love, Hope and Fear: A World Collection’, Derby Museums and Art Gallery website: <https://derbymuseums.org/collection/a-world-collection/> (accessed 8 August 2025).

V21 Artspace, ‘Objects of Love, Hope and Fear: A World Collection’ [a virtual 3D version of the World Collection Gallery at Derby Museum]: <https://v21artspace.com/world-cultures-project> (accessed 8 August 2025).



IMAGE 6 Miniature Asante stool from Derby Museums Collection. Photo: Derby Museum and Art Gallery. Courtesy of Derby Museums Trust.

You may wish to give students instructions on where to find the stool and guidance to focus on the ‘Furnish’ section of the gallery.

Description of activity

Introduction to the topic [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with an overview of museum practices connected to the collection and display of colonial objects in the Global North during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Highlight to students that the case study will encourage them to engage with wider debates about dispossession under colonialism and contemporary demands for reparative/restitutive justice. Explain how the session will also test practical skills of primary source analysis, using an object, a diary and a virtual gallery space.

Part 1: Small group work [20 minutes]

Bring some materials such as A5 paper and pens for students to create spider diagrams.

Divide students into two groups. Groups have 10 minutes to discuss the questions below and create a spider diagram containing their ideas and responses. Each group then has 5 minutes to report back to the rest of the class.

Aim: To establish familiarity with some of the historical and historiographical contexts connected to King Prempeh’s miniature stool. The questions encourage students to start thinking about the object’s provenance and acquisition amidst wider debates regarding colonialism and museum practice.

Questions for Group 1:

- How does Hicks describe the relationship between museums and empire in his book? To what extent were museums ‘weapons’ of empire?
- What are the legacies of empire for museums in the Global North today? How does Hicks suggest museums face up to these histories?
- To what extent does Hicks’s ‘theory of taking’ differ from the description of looting in Baden-Powell’s account?

Questions for Group 2:

- How does Baden-Powell justify the British expedition to Asante during the Fourth Anglo-Asante War (1895–6)? How are the inhabitants of Asante described in the source?
- How does Baden-Powell describe the looting of the Asante palace in Kumasi?
- To what extent does Baden-Powell's description differ from the interpretation of dispossession offered by Hicks?

Part 2: Small group work [15 minutes]

Students should have used the virtual exhibition tool to explore the gallery prior to the session. Have images of the stool in situ on slides or as handouts. Divide students into two new groups. Provide either a digital or physical copy of the 'Furnish' gallery guide (available at <https://tinyurl.com/2sb8tvdk>) on one table, and digital access to the virtual 'World Collection' gallery on another table. Each table should also be provided with plenty of Post-It notes. Groups have 5 minutes at each table to discuss the questions below and to write their responses on Post-It notes, before swapping tables with the other group. The Post-It notes should then be used as prompts to generate further discussion across the whole class for another 5 minutes.

Aim: To encourage awareness of how King Prempeh's miniature stool is currently labelled and exhibited within the World Collection Gallery. The questions encourage students to think about how objects come together to form a collection in museum contexts. Students will come away with an understanding of how histories come to be constructed and meanings conveyed through such processes. Moving between tables in the classroom is intended to serve as a reminder that they are thinking about a 3D space.

Questions:

- How is King Prempeh's miniature stool situated within this collection of associated objects, both in the display case and wider gallery?
- What is the effect of exhibiting the object in this way?
- Are these objects of significance to individuals and communities who are alive today? How does current museum interpretation attempt to demonstrate this?

Part 3: Large group discussion [10 minutes]

Provide copies, or display on a slide, the current label for King Prempeh's miniature stool:

Miniature Asante stool

This was given by Asantehene (King) Prempeh I of Asante to a Captain Roberts, in Sierra Leone in 1900. In 1896, during the ‘Scramble for Africa’, the British invaded the Asante Kingdom intending to make it into a British protectorate. Prempeh advocated non-violent resistance but was taken prisoner, along with other members of the royal family and several Asante chiefs. They were first held captive in Sierra Leone, then in 1900, exiled to a British prison island in the Seychelles. Captain Roberts may have been one of Prempeh’s captors, or captain of the ship, the *Dwarka*, that took them to the Seychelles. The British declared the Asante Kingdom the British Gold Coast colony. Prempeh and the other surviving exiles were allowed to return in 1924. Prempeh died in 1931. The Gold Coast became the independent Republic of Ghana in 1957.’

- ‘Collection. Objects of Love, Hope and Fear: a World Collection’, Derby Museums and Art Gallery website: <https://derbymuseums.org/collection/a-world-collection/> (accessed 8 August 2025).

Give the students some time to read the label and reflect on it. Then use the following questions to prompt discussion:

- How does this label seek to engage with both histories and recent approaches to objects of extra-European provenance acquired through colonial violence?
- How successful is it in conveying these histories and approaches to public audiences? How necessary is it to do so?
- How does the wider context of both the object’s historical acquisition and contemporary display shape the interpretation?
- What would you keep or change if you had a chance to redesign this label?

Aim: This part of the seminar encourages students to consider contemporary approaches to exhibiting objects amongst diverse public audiences, and to reflect on the difficulties of conveying historical complexity and debate within the tight word constraints of the label format. It is a good opportunity to discuss the balance between entertaining and informing public audiences, as well as raising student awareness of different ways in which the object might be interpreted and its history exhibited. This speaks to wider questions about the subjective nature of historical interpretation within both public-facing and academic forms of the discipline.