

Authors:

- Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton (Research Fellow, Decolonising Arts Institute, University of the Arts London)
- Tate Greenhalgh (Senior National Interpretation Consultant, National Trust)
- Ananda Rutherford (Research Fellow, Decolonising Arts Institute, University of the Arts London)

Trophies of Empire: modes of acquisition, legitimization and colonial denial in art and heritage interpretation

Within the discipline of art history, and cultural heritage more broadly, there are increasing moves to acknowledge violent colonial contexts for the production, consumption and subsequent institutional acquisition of artworks and objects into collections. Recognition that plundering or looting are part of the provenance of an artefact is crucial, but definitions of these terms emphasise theft or the use of physical force in settings of war or civil disorder. This does not adequately account for colonial transactions that did not directly involve theft or force, but nonetheless arose in the shadow of colonial violence, mired in the sometimes subtle, but deeply problematic colonial power dynamics of empire.

This paper comes out of the two-year AHRC-funded research project, [Provisional Semantics](#), led by Tate in partnership with University of the Arts London's Decolonising Arts Institute, Imperial War Museums and the National Trust. It will present some of the findings from the project's National Trust case study, which focuses on how objects have been interpreted at the [Clive Museum, Powis Castle](#).

The paper argues for an expanded understanding of modes of acquisition in the broader context of colonial violence. It evidences how the act of gifting, and *an absence of looting*, in the provenance of an art object is invoked in present day contexts to obscure, or even deny, the violence and traumas of empire, the insidious relationships of power and influence between the coloniser and colonised, and the ongoing legacies of empire for contemporary audiences.