

Imagining Other Childhoods: Dolls and the Museum of Childhood as an Imperial Space

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Abstract

This article considers how museums of childhood in Britain were imagined as racialized spaces, designed to simultaneously project both a notion of universal childhood and of racial hierarchies. The legacies of this work matter for efforts today to decolonize museums. The case study is the ethnographic doll collections of Edward Lovett (1852–1933), an amateur folklorist best known for his collection of home-made dolls. The ways in which these dolls were collected, described, cataloged, and displayed reveals the racialized assumptions of British imperialism in the early 20th century, including the infantilization of other cultures and the widely held belief in evolutionary biology. These doll collections are still displayed for children, and this article considers how contemporary museums negotiate the conflicting impetuses to decolonize museums, to teach today's young people about the prejudices of their ancestors, and to engage with the widely accepted idea that all childhoods are defined by play.

Keywords

imperialism, dolls, museum of childhood, decolonizing the museum, children, play

Introduction

When Edward Lovett sought to establish a children's museum in 1915 to “enable children in East London to compare their own toys with toys of other days and other countries” his intention was to create a museum for children designed to display his own collection and values (Lovett, 1915b, p. 8). The museum was to be a pedagogical

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site, a place where impoverished children could view Lovett's collection of dolls and could learn that their most pressing concerns—play and education—were central to all childhoods and that they were therefore connected to others across the globe. However, the nature of the exhibition, the items chosen and the ways they were displayed also highlighted British imperial values, and the dominant societal belief in evolutionary biology and racial hierarchies. The museum was intended as a space where children learned to negotiate claims of universality and shared experience, but this was embedded within a hierarchical framework underpinned by economic, political, and cultural power which emphasized difference.

Although Lovett's collection of dolls was small, its centrality to contemporary Museums of Childhood provides an insight into the imperial roots of these institutions. Lovett displayed his dolls in a number of short-term exhibitions, including the London Day Training College in 1908, the National Museum of Wales Cardiff in 1914, the Whitechapel Museum and Art Gallery in 1915, and the London in 1916. His final project was to set up a permanent children's museum to display the dolls in the North or East End of London. Although this was never established and the bulk of the collection was sold to the Museum of Wales in 1919, there are significant links between this idea and later institutions, not least the significance of the Lovett artifacts to these later museums. The idea of a museum designed primarily for children, and reflecting objects assumed to be of interest to them, was a significant innovation. No such specialist museum existed in Britain, and while Bethnal Green Museum in the East End of London developed a few children's rooms from around 1922, it was not until 1955 that Britain had a dedicated museum of childhood set up in Edinburgh. These museums were based on two, not always compatible, ideas: a museum for the study of childhood through a study of their material culture, and a museum with children as the key target audience (Brookshaw, 2009; Jordanova, 1997). While a small element of the current depository, the Lovett displays were important in the formation of both the Young V&A (Victoria & Albert, previously V&A Museum of Childhood) which emerged from the Bethnal Green Museum, and the Museum of Childhood in Edinburgh, which has displayed Lovett's dolls, on loan from the Museum of Wales, since 1961 (Gardner, 2020; Haines, 2017). The dolls were returned to the Museum of Wales in June 2023 after this article was submitted. Not only were Lovett's dolls important to these early collections, but his model of exhibiting dolls and other toys in glass cases has also influenced the composition and display of toys in museums of childhood across the United Kingdom, and the dolls remain among the most studied objects for historians (Brookshaw, 2009). This article argues that by unpacking the Lovett collection we can see with more clarity how the formation of museums of childhood were intertwined with the notion of an imperial museum. Lovett's exhibitions were rooted in the display of British imperial values, the material representation of racial hierarchies and the othering of non-White populations.

As adults work to decolonize the more significant institutional structures such as the British Museum or V&A, this article suggests that museums of childhood must engage more actively with these ideas. Taking the Lovett collection as a case study, this article examines a number of Lovett's dolls, and his collecting practices and public displays, to

analyze the racial and social hierarchies underpinning these exhibitions, and ultimately institutions. It considers the pedagogical functions of the imperial museum, before reflecting on the contemporary challenges facing staff curating these collections in the light of more active pressure to decolonize. The article concludes by analyzing the continued presence of children in the museum, both the objects of the pedagogical endeavors of adults and as a creators of their own meanings, and as users of space in the museums in ways that adults do not always foresee, appreciate, or even recognize.

Exploring the Details of Edward Lovett's Doll Collection

Edward Lovett (1852–1933) was an amateur folklorist who spent his spare time collecting charms and amulets that reflected his interest in the material culture of magic (Cadbury, 2012; Williams, 1999). Although an amateur, he was well regarded and built a local reputation in South London through public lectures. Lovett's collections were established as he traveled in and around London and the South of England where he purchased and exchanged objects that reflected the survival of ancient beliefs and superstitions, although this was supplemented by ethnographic material purchased from across the globe (Cadbury, 2021, 2021). Lovett became interested in obtaining dolls made by children from household items—wooden spoons, shoes, loofahs, bones, rag, and skittles—with drawn on faces and roughly fashioned clothes. These dolls Lovett categorized as Emergency and Slum Dolls, Emergency because they were made from scrap materials. Interested in the meanings ascribed by poor children, he exchanged new dolls for ones like the shoe doll that is now displayed in Edinburgh's Museum of Childhood. This collecting strategy was both innovative and highly problematic, potentially exploitative to the individual children and also misleading by ascribing more meaning to the short-term playthings of children than they themselves attributed (Haines, 2017). Lovett's collections remain a key focus for historians of children's material culture and a starting point for museums of childhood, giving unique access to material made by children rather than produced by adults for children (Brookshaw, 2009). Yet the collections themselves, and the collecting strategies, are underpinned by problematic assumptions about the authority of the educated White male collector to interpret children's lives through ethnographic writings and public exhibitions of material culture. This not only showcases adult authority to collect and display, but the imperial roots of the museum that can be seen in Lovett's decision to juxtapose folklore and the material objects of superstition with children's toys within the same analytical framework of primitivism (Ashcroft, 2000). Non-White cultures, lower class culture, and childhood culture were thus categorized together as lacking the sophistication of educated rationality.

Lovett's doll collection was primarily ethnographic and was drawn from material purchased from across the world. It reveals the same intentions to preserve disappearing cultures and crafting traditions that was evident in his folklore material but was also intended to facilitate discussion about the history of the doll (Lovett, 1906, p. 6). Lovett (1914) argued that "no serious study of the dolls of the world has yet been attempted, for the literary contributions to the subject have been entirely fragmentary and trivial,

treating it merely from the childish point of view,” without subjecting the dolls to the intellectual rigor of adult scrutiny (p. 6). Although G. Stanley Hall’s *A Study of Dolls* had been published in 1897, its emphasis on child psychology and the way children played, was very different from Lovett’s (1915a) focus on material culture and probably unknown to Lovett as a folklorist. Lovett sought to rectify this gap in his book *The Child’s Doll* and in his museum handbooks, which reflected the categories used to display the dolls. Lovett divided the collection into categories including religious and ceremonial dolls; magic, superstition and spirit dolls; performing dolls (puppets and marionettes); Russian dolls; Souvenir dolls (largely from continental Europe); Oriental dolls and Indian dolls and miscellaneous. This article will focus on three particular groups: European souvenir dolls, Oriental dolls, and dolls coming from Africa.

The Catalogue of the Art Society exhibition listed 9 out of 24 cases featuring European dolls, always described in terms of “careful workmanship” (Fine Art Society, 1916, p. 6), often displaying national dress, particularly of rural and peasant communities stretching from the Netherlands and Belgium to Russia, from Sweden to Bosnia. That the souvenir dolls represented national differences through the traditional clothing of rural communities spoke to the power of the formation of imagined national communities, and the co-option of socially and economically marginal groups into the national myth. As demonstrated by the dolls of France (Case F), Holland (Case J) and Belgium (Case K), this was often a form of internal colonialism. The European cases showcased the widely recognized artistic superiority of the German dolls, whether porcelain, papier mâché or wooden, but included English wax dolls, Dutch wooden dolls and French bisque and papier mâché dolls. These dolls were not playthings, but were material representations of European culture, reminders of national differences important in Edwardian society; and examples of detailed craftsmanship and a crucial visual representation that the backbone of European culture was unchanging, wholesome, White, hardworking, reliable, peasant culture, and very different from the lives of impoverished children in London.

Lovett’s cases of Japanese and Chinese dolls were explicitly designed to essentialize the sophistication but otherness of these cultures. Designated “oriental dolls” in the handbook, the Japanese pygmy dolls were described as “very rare and curious” or “dolls of very fine workmanship” (Lovett, 1914, pp. 21, 14). The 1914 *Handbook* highlighted that the Japanese dolls required careful inspection because of “the most beautifully finished” detail (Lovett, 1914, p. 21). The dolls thus became the material representation of an ancient civilization and a culture which was both refined and artistic. The sophistication of Japanese dolls built on contemporary perceptions in the popular imagination of Japan as “the land of toys and decorative quaintness,” a land of femininity, smallness, desirability and artistry reflecting Western views of Japanese culture (Shoaf, 2010, p. 183). Judy Shoaf (2010, p. 178) argues that from the 1870s on, Japan became known as “the very paradise of dolls,” partly because of *Hina Matsuri* the annual festival of dolls. This helped to perpetuate a common American and British colonial fantasy of Japanese women as “child-like people of a toy-sized land whose women were doll-like” (Shoaf, 2010, pp. 177–178). The dolls, both in the Lovett collection and later in highly publicized schemes such as the 1927 American-Japanese

doll exchange, played an important role in perpetuating and evidencing these views (Hayashi, n.d.). The Chinese dolls were displayed in the same case. Their “dresses are very interesting, in some cases of really great beauty” (Lovett, 1914, p. 20) perhaps a reflection on the past glory of what Lovett still called the Celestial Empire. At the same time even the dolls, on close inspection, reflected the perceived backwardness of Chinese tradition by depicting foot-binding: “in some cases the feet of the ladies illustrate the cramping deformity practiced by them” (Lovett, 1914, p. 20). The Chinese dolls were thus underpinned by undertones of barbarism and White saviorism that reflected many representations of empire and was used to justify colonial expansion. The dolls embodied imperial perceptions of the cultures of East Asia in ways that visitors would understand.

By contrast, there was no one case of dolls from Africa. In the 1916 exhibition Case J included an “African section,” comprised of a few dolls made from gourds or other local materials in Tunis and Algeria, intended to show “ingenuity” but also a lack of artistic ability and resources (Fine Art Society, 1916, p. 7). These were displayed alongside dolls produced by the Inuit or by Native Americans. These were people groups who were generally categorized in early 20th century Britain for their technological backwardness, subsistence agriculture or nomadic lifestyles, lack of modern scientific knowledge, and industrial capacity. Framing these dolls together reflected a shared and assumed position on the evolutionary scale. Religious or Spirit Dolls were held separately in Case A, these included Ushabti dolls from Ancient Egyptian funeral rites, Sudanese fertility dolls and dolls from the Bantu-speaking tribes of central Africa that were used in religious rituals. These dolls had much more in common with Lovett’s earlier interest in folklore and reflect the fundamental problem at the heart of Lovett’s collecting, his failure to distinguish between dolls used for religious and ritual practices, and dolls made by children or intended for children to play with. In doing so, he built on widespread imperial prejudice about the nature of African religion and culture, reducing the cultural and spiritual practices to the level of children’s play, infantilizing African patterns of belief and behavior, and building on an underlying assumption that these cultures were static, unchanging and childish (Said, 1978). Although many of the British and Russian dolls were dated, linked to a particular historical moment, the other dolls were generally viewed as representative of the undated “essence” of an entire culture.

The infantilization of African cultures through a misunderstanding of their material culture is seen most clearly in Lovett’s correspondence with the Rev. Alexander Hetherwick, a Presbyterian missionary based in Malawi. Hetherwick received “the figure of a child’s doll” (Lovett, 1903, p. 61) Formed from wood, bark rope, and calico rag from a fellow missionary. Attached underneath the calico rag garment was a “tiny box made of the handle of a gourd cup and shaped like a pill-box; which was supposed to contain the spirit of some dead ancestors which has been captured and inserted” (Lovett, 1903, p. 62). The figure encapsulated a very locally specific belief about the spirit world and the relationship between the living, the dead, and the natural world. The letter discussed the different spiritual traditions of the local Achewa, Yao, and Mang’anja peoples ending with: “The little child creeps past the old chief’s grave by

the wayside in great fear and trembling. It is the abode of the awful unseen, the home and haunt of that dread denizen of the other world whose existence is an article in the creed of all childhoods" (Lovett, 1903, p. 63). This ascribes the irrational fear of the supernatural as a feature universally present across all childhoods, a fear which can be conquered by reason and logic and by an education in the modern European tradition which emphasized discipline, rationality, empiricism, and conceptual thinking (Sengupta, 2003). In these terms, children can potentially be reformed, and irrational fears can be categorized as normal and natural. But the letter reinforces the infantilization of non-European cultures. Apart from the last reference to children, the rest of the letter emphasizes adult beliefs, giving great detail regarding the links between objects and the spirit world, implying the impossibility of conceptual thinking, and suggesting that the adults who follow these practices are also childish and have failed to reach full adulthood (Sen, 2005). To have these ritual objects included and categorized in the Lovett collection alongside children's playthings both undermines a complex belief system and reinforces the supposed superiority of European modernity vis-à-vis both children and colonized peoples.

The tensions inherent within the definition of what Lovett categorized as "the doll" is central to our understanding of the imperial roots of his collection. Lovett brought adult ceremonial objects, children's playthings and souvenir representations of European peasant cultures together within a single framing as "dolls." Their only shared characteristic was that they were objects made in the form of a human, beyond this their cultural and practical significance varied dramatically. When Lovett (1906, p. 5) argued in 1906 that his dolls "were a perfect reproduction of the people who made them, but in miniature" it suggested that the displays of dolls were intentionally designed as a mechanism for comparing cultures and categorizing the people who created them according to popularly accepted hierarchies of modernity and race.

Displaying Dolls in the Imperial Museum

Lovett's collections should be seen in the wider context of the late Victorian and Edwardian museum. Imperial museums helped broaden consent for imperialism among the working-class population in Britain, proclaimed Britain's technological prowess, and highlighted the benefits that industrial capitalism and imperial plunder from Empire had brought to the population (Jordanova, 1997; Mackenzie, 2017). The museums were also used to showcase British civilizational superiority and reinforce the assumption that the British imperial mission was to "save" the colonized people from savagery, gifting them the benefits of European modernity. The doll exhibitions, although mobile, fit within this wider trajectory, which evidenced the formation of multiple national and local museums such as the Horniman or Pitt Rivers Museums, each with their own display of the advance of British civilization and primitivism of other cultures.

Museums were not just a place for storing artifacts but were "sites of cultural production," so that even the way the collection was arranged for public consumption was designed to perform power with the objects deliberately organized to highlight racial difference (Barringer, 1998, p. 357). Lovett's dolls were also intended to display a

hierarchy of race and civilization, to highlight the industriousness of European peasant traditions, the exquisiteness of the Japanese, and the crudeness of African dolls. Lovett's dolls thus showcased Social Darwinism, a material representation of contemporary beliefs about the inferiority of particular "races." The 1908 exhibition, for example, was explicitly formulated around the idea of the home, showing what the organizers deemed to be social progress from mud-covered wattle huts to the "modern dwelling," from "the most primitive form of shelter constructed by man" to the most sophisticated ("An Exhibition of Toys," 1908). The *Times* newspaper review deliberately likened hut-dwellers to children: "These models are the work of children of five. From this simple abode the child is led by degrees to a knowledge of others of a more advanced kind, until the modern dwelling is arrived at, which is the culmination of the process of evolution" ("An Exhibition of Toys," 1908). The wider context is also significant as these toy representations of humans from other parts of the world were presented at the same time as real people were kept as living anthropological spectacles at the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1911 or the 1924 Wembley exhibition (Mackenzie, 2017, p. 104). It is not hard to think that the people of London would have drawn these parallels.

Lovett's dolls were arranged in glass cases, ordered A-J with an accompanying handbook which appears to have been revised between exhibitions. The handbooks reinforced the "orderly arrangement and the transformation of mere curios into objects of scientific interests by appropriate classification," based on Social Darwinist ideas about racial hierarchy (Coombes, 1994, p. 113). The dolls were arranged so that they could be easily compared, and visitors were led to make their own "scientific" assumptions. The glass cases contributed to Lovett's claim that the dolls were a serious ethnographic resource, and produced a directly comparative system of classification which made this knowledge seem scientific, the production of objective truth and a material representation of the "progress of civilization" (Black & Barringer, 2022, p. 205). Like the Liverpool Museum studied by Kate Hill, Lovett's dolls were presented out of context and trapped in cases so that they could be objectified, viewed, and analyzed, almost like taxidermy (Hill, 2011, p. 205). Furthermore, the dolls became evidence of cultures that were unchanging, static, and unable to evolve. The scientific study of ethnographic objects fitted the wider claim of the imperial museum, which proudly proclaimed to the world that the British had the rational capacity to curate the world's past as well as guide its future. As Swenson and Mandler (2013, p. 8) argue, preservationism became "a symbol of a nation's ability to rule overseas—a measurement of civilization," and the ability to hold artifacts and to care for them properly became an indicator of scientific advancement, a justification for imperial plunder and the reason why collections like the Benin bronzes are still so controversial. But the power of Lovett's collection is that they were based on ordinary objects, not significant pieces of national heritage.

Museums had a distinctively pedagogical role in early 20th century Britain. Intended to inform the public as well as to facilitate scientific study, they eroded the boundaries between scientific and popular knowledge (Coombes, 1994, p. 123). Museums were envisioned as democratic spaces, in which "ordinary people" could

appreciate the benefits of British civilization and could admire the superiority of the White race. Visitors became consumers of knowledge about the colonies and became producers of knowledge as they read, absorbed, and interacted with the collections, with the empire institutionalized into glass cases (Hoffenberg, 2001). Ordinary people could feel ownership and responsibility both for the collections and for the wider empire (Coombes, 1994). In this process, visitors were remade into citizens of the empire, with emotional and as well as intellectual ties to the subject peoples, though shared information about their heritage and culture and a shared sense of moral purpose (Richards, 1990). Visitors were not manipulated into a belief system, but participated in an “active reworking” of the knowledge displayed, yet always within a context of assumptions about cultural difference, social status, racial hierarchy, and science (Coombes, 1994, p. 29).

Working-class children had a distinctive role in the “dispersal” of knowledge to the public (MacKenzie, 2017, p. 7). By the 1920s, this included leisure activities such as uniformed organizations including the Scout Movement, annual celebrations of Empire Day, and colonial stamp collecting. The idea that museums offered a unique space for “visual instruction,” so that children could “see the treasures about which they have been told in schools” was well accepted by the 1920s, and in 1924 it was suggested that 7,500 of the 110,000 children in London had visited museums (Phipps, 1924). Children became a target audience, and as research into active learning became more widely accepted, the V&A as one of the bigger museums expanded provision to include hands-on learning, including workshops with activities such as weaving, clay modeling, and drawing during the school holidays (Horner, 1929). These activities were intended to “unconsciously educate the hosts of children who throng the museum during holidays and weekends” (Horner, 1929) even if they did not engage fully with the exhibits. As the directors of the wax museum Madame Tussauds had learned a century earlier, balancing education and entertainment allowed the museum to fulfill both its pedagogical role and to attract young visitors (Gribling, 2018).

Lovett’s final project was to establish a permanent children’s museum in the North or East End of London to display the dolls, offering the possibility for local children to see them. As with the nationally significant museums, the museum was intended for both education and amusement and was designed to “be easily accessible to the poorest” (“A Children’s Museum,” 1916, p. 9). This desire fitted with Lovett’s concern that his collection of folklore exhibits in the Wellcome Museum in 1916 should be accessible to working-class Londoners (Cadbury, 2021, p. 154). A slum doll from London could therefore be viewed by the children who had previously played with it as a scientific specimen, as representing something more about working class culture and experiences of poverty than they had anticipated when they first wrapped an old shoe in cloth. This was also a reminder of the epistemological violence of displaying ritual and cultural objects as children’s objects outside their original context. Likewise, poor children could view other cultures represented through dolls. East London had high numbers of immigrants and sizeable Jewish, Chinese, Indian, and Black communities. That these communities would form part of the daily experience of poor White children, or that children from these communities might visit the museum, was never

recognized or reflected on by Lovett. But ultimately Lovett was to be disappointed, and in a letter in September 1919 he noted “after a really hard struggle on behalf of the poor little kiddies of East London” the scheme has died due to “a want of interest in the aforesaid dirty little kids” (Lovett, 1919). For Lovett, this represented a failure of the authorities to be sufficiently interested in children, rather than concerns about the collection itself.

Childhood as a Universal Experience

Although Lovett’s doll collection emphasized the differences between people groups, its other intention was to highlight the universality of the experience of being a child. Lovett viewed all children as the same, not merely as a small object of adult control and decision-making in institutions like schools or home, but because of a shared interest in play: “children are generally interested in hearing anything about their toys” (Lovett, 1915a, n.p.). In 1908, Lovett was concerned with holding a toy exhibition designed for children because usually “museums, he said, were much above the heads of children, and we wanted something to be a great influence for good to the next generation,” the museum was intended to cater to children, both in the present and as future citizens (“An Exhibition of Toys,” 1908, n.p.). A museum of childhood was grounded in the understanding that children were characterized primarily by a desire to learn and a desire to play and so the purpose of these exhibitions was explicitly “to instruct and amuse the youth of Whitechapel” (“Dolls from Other Lands,” 1916, p. 11). The 1908 exhibition was also designed as a space for the academic study of the child, with a hope that visitors would include specialists such as philanthropists, educators, anthropologists, and sociologists “with a view to gaining more light on the character predilections, and latent possibilities of the young” as they played (“An Exhibition of Toys,” 1908).

Dolls were important because they represented the child’s desire to play, the material evidence that children were the same across the world because of a shared interest in toys and in playing (Darian-Smith & Sleight, 2016). The 1908 exhibition report suggested that dolls:

bring into prominence the value of play in the early years of life . . . there is no such thing as progress in toyland—that the toys which most pleased children 2,000 years ago are the toys for which they still stretch out their hands instinctively and which, if they cannot find them, they are inclined to make. (“An Exhibition of Toys,” 1908, n.p.)

These reports drew on the widely held assumption that dolls were a universal feature of human societies, and that throughout time and across space children have wanted to play with small, inanimate versions of themselves (Hall, 1897). The reports suggested too that children were a primitive form of adult. For the child visiting the museum, Calvert (1992) argues that “doll play gave children a pleasant sense of superiority and control in a world that rarely permitted them such feelings” (p. 117). Although dolls were often assumed to be gendered, with connotations of nurture, care and fashion,

there is, perhaps surprisingly, very limited evidence of this in the Lovett papers (Jacobs, 2008). Rather it was assumed that “some will be more interested, perhaps, in the dolls of all countries, which are not only a proof of the universal love of dolls, but an object-lesson in manners and customs; and none can fail to be touched to the heart by dolls of the poorest children, made of brushes, of wooden spoons, of clothes-pegs, of bones, of anything on which the mother-instinct and the play-instinct can exercise their ineradicable hunger” (“Dolls from Other Lands,” 1916, p. 11). Although the “mother-instinct” was mentioned, it was the “play-instinct” which Lovett felt to be most important. The dolls held in tension the idea of similarity and difference, both showing that all children are the same and equally lacking in progress, while also highlighting the details of disparate cultures and experiences, displayed to show that some were more refined or civilized than others, whether because of class or race. To some extent, it was the presumed adulthood which was different.

The emergence of new ideas about childhood as a universal experience was deeply connected to ideas of White superiority. As noted earlier, not only were the dolls to be object lessons in cultural difference, but many of the Lovett dolls “were never intended as toys for children” (Brookshaw, 2009, p. 381). The dolls—representations of adults and objects used for adult purposes—thus contributed to the infantilization of non-European cultures. Ashcroft (2000) has traced how the emergence of new ideas about modern childhood coincided with the expansion of British or European power across the globe. New ideas about race, primitivism, and childhood intersected and provided a variety of others against which the rational White adult male could measure themselves (McClintock, 2013). The British Empire became a site of youthful adventure, evidence of the conquering virility of the White race, a tangible demonstration not only of European military and economic dominance of the globe but also of White supremacy in thought, attitude, and civilization. Within this discourse non-White groups were infantilized as children, supposedly marked by an ability to learn, by the need for firm governance by a more advanced civilization and linked in a parent-child relationship that centered on control, education, dominance, and development at the same time as these ideas were being used about children in the metropole. Thus, the parallel ideas regarding childhood and the racialized backwardness of colonized people became mutually reinforcing. What differed was the potential for the White child to outgrow this life stage to become dominant themselves (Sen, 2005). While the association between play, innocence, and childhood was central to new ideas of childhood in and was increasingly true in practice in the global North, it was rarely the experience in the colonies (Cunningham, 2020). Given the centrality of the Lovett collection to contemporary museums of childhood in the United Kingdom, it becomes important to unpack these assumptions of difference, whiteness, and control at the heart of these museums, even as they proclaim the special position of *all* children.

The Museum of Childhood in the 21st Century

The provenance of a collection is important, but so too is the way it inhabits contemporary space and time, interacting with the political and cultural concerns of our

current moment. Lovett's doll collection was not only an early 20th century imperial fantasy, but also continues to have a 21st century presence in the Museum of Wales, the Young V&A, and the Museum of Childhood Edinburgh (MOC). The MOC, which claims a position as the "first museum of childhood" in the world, was set up in 1955 by Patrick Murray, a local councilor notorious for his vocal dislike of children (Gardner, 2020). In many ways, the MOC has become the ultimate nostalgia museum, and despite a refit to the ground floor in 2018, it remains a random collection of artifacts of childhood, predominantly school materials and toys created by adults for children (Roberts, 2006). The Lovett dolls remain among the most memorable items for visitors and to historians, partly because the slum dolls remain among the few material objects produced by children themselves (Brookshaw, 2009; Gardner, 2020). The dolls, for example in the Japanese and Peruvian displays, feature frequently in visitor memories (Iain, 2020). The continued arrangement of rows of dolls in antiquated glass cases reflects the broader approach of a museum in need of funding and the descriptions in the side panels are generally reflective of Lovett's own words and categorizations. Adult visitors described the dolls room as "creepy," "stupid," the dolls as "evil" (Nuthman, n.d., 0:01, 2:18, 3:15)—the last being a commonly held trope since the introduction of doll horror movies with *The Great Gabbo* in 1929. The visceral reaction of a member of a group of American tourists on seeing the cabinets was particularly interesting: "OMG . . . that just does not look right . . . that looks really racist" (3:26–3:51), a comment which was picked up in a number of the blog responses. Importantly, this was a reaction to seeing a collection of golliwog dolls. These popular black rag dolls appeared initially in children's books written by Florence Kate Upton in the 1890s but became important in children's popular culture in Britain until the 1970s, featuring in a wide range of books, as commercial and homemade dolls and even a mascot for a British jam manufacture. Grossbard (2021) suggests that golliwogs were not only a racist representation of Black inferiority, drawing on historical traditions such as Black minstrels and the history of enslavement, but that the emphasis on the "naughty" doll helped to reinforce the parallels between innocence and whiteness, highlighting the White child's difference from the doll size Black adult (Rollo, 2018). Although not part of the Lovett collection, the golliwog dolls functioned within children's homes like the Lovett dolls functioned in the museum, simultaneously highlighting similarities between children but even more showing how to be a White child was to learn, be and act as different from these others.

This leaves us with the question about how these dolls should be shown in contemporary Scotland. The MOC displayed a collection of golliwog dolls until spring 2017 when the museum faced a "string of complaints by tourists" (Gamp, 2017, para.1). The local student community and other members of the public (seen, for example, in the visitor's book) and the MOC was accused of "propagating racist caricatures of black people" (Munro, 2017, para. 2). In response the museum removed some of the dolls and added a notice which recognized how golliwogs represented "negative racial stereotypes" but argued "that it is right to display these toys because they were such a significant part of British childhood from the 1890s to the 1950s" (Walker, 2017). The approach was supported by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, that agreed it

was important to show how these dolls had contributed to children's understanding of race and racial stereotypes in the past (Curator Stevens quoted in *The Newsroom*, 2018, para. 11). Grossbard (2021, p. 160) argues that material objects such as golliwog dolls show the "pervasive whiteness in histories of childhood" because they taught children the "expectations of whiteness" by providing an Other to measure their appearance and behavior against. Like the Lovett dolls, the golliwog dolls not only highlighted similarities between children but also reinforced difference.

As the debate over the display of golliwogs played out in the local media (Munro, 2017; *The Newsroom*, 2018; Walker, 2017), this balance between an unequivocal rejection of racism and a desire to contextualize the collections, and to understand the formation of racist attitudes in the past, is important. It is rare for a museum display to unpack the nuance of these representations for visitors, yet the golliwog controversy is an important feature of the current British culture wars. The emotive support for golliwogs and the virulent and racist defense of these dolls on X, formerly Twitter, means that the MOCs stand is significant (Olusoga, 2023). However, while the overt racism of the golliwog is mentioned, there appears very limited opposition to the other dolls in the collection, and very little critical engagement by either visitors or activists with their inclusion, despite panels which admit "these dolls are more than children's playthings and allow us a glimpse into the lives of people from vastly different cultures" (Museum of Childhood, 2017). This perhaps suggests that we are further from decolonizing our museum collections than we might like to think.

Decolonizing the Museum of Childhood

The Museums in Edinburgh have begun taking action to recognize the impact of racism on their collections, and the MOC is a small collection within this broader organization. In June 2020, in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, Edinburgh City Council issued an anti-racism pledge which recognized the need to reevaluate the collections, to "review our use of provenance, contextual information, and terminology" and to include people of color, both staff and visitors, within this process so that a "more inclusive range of voices are mainstreamed and represented year-round" and so that "Black and minority ethnic histories are represented and that inherited, colonial language, values and narratives are recognized and challenged" (Edinburgh Council, 2020, Action Points 6, 7, 8).

My observation about the MOC and other institutions is that there is more, albeit slow, progress made on the recognition of overt forms of racial prejudice and their impacts than on deep decolonization of museums. That is perhaps why the golliwog collection was deemed so offensive, but the Lovett collections are ignored as ethnographic, with unchallengeable scientific authority. Museums and Galleries Scotland, the national development body for Scotland's museum sector, has also recognized the need to decolonize all 450 Scottish museums and galleries, and to re-examine the historical legacy of slavery, of colonialism and of racial hierarchies (Curry, 2022; Palmer, 2022). In particular, it recognizes the importance for museums to "reject mythologies of white racial superiority" (Curry, 2022, para. 4) which form the basis of so many

collections, exhibitions and institutions, and inform so much knowledge about the past. However, the focus to date seems to have been on museums that proclaim national greatness. For most of the museum sector, even the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford whose processes for decolonizing appear among the most committed and robust in the United Kingdom, the focus is primarily on the “big issues,” adult issues such as the proper burial and return of the many human remains in the collection and the return of significant treasures plundered from Indigenous people (Pitt Rivers Museum, 2020). In the face of such overt wrongdoing and such complicated political negotiation, how significant are dolls in a little local museum for children?

The 2020 Pitt Rivers Internal Review (Oxford, n.d.) provides a context that would be helpful for the MOC, particularly given that both institutions have benefited from Lovett’s collections, whether folklore artifacts or dolls. The review recommends a more nuanced analysis of the displays, the items in the depository, and the collecting strategies of donors, and calls for an overt recognition that both the collections and the institution are rooted in imperial ideas about White superiority, racial hierarchy, and British social and economic domination. The Internal Review highlights how the “Museum’s *rootedness* in coloniality [emphasis added] is reflected in the very presence of its collections” (Oxford, n.d., para. 4) because the forcible removal of local objects at the same as the resources and people were being exploited and their local social, economic, and political systems destroyed was reinforced and justified by imperial institutions that produced, created, and represented knowledge. It goes on to recognize the short-term devastation and long-term legacy that this had on local communities who have suffered the violence of empire. In response, Pitt Rivers has set up information boards and have removed human remains from display. For the MOC, curators need to do more than think about the doll collection and visual representation of racial hierarchy to fulfill their moral and practical obligations under the 2020 Pledge. They also need to highlight the collecting strategies of Lovett and to analyze what these displays say about colonial knowledge practices, the infantilization of colonized cultures and the hierarchies of Eurocentric scientific knowledge. This could mean removing much of the collection from the museum, recognizing that these objects are inappropriate for historians of childhood, that dolls have lives beyond being children’s toys. Another important aspect is the historicizing of the objects as well as the museum, recognizing that these dolls represent past African or Japanese cultures at a specific moment in history, rather than essentializing these cultures as static and unchanging.

But simply removing artifacts is not necessarily the most appropriate response, particularly when we recognize the pedagogical imperatives of the MOC, whose aim is to teach children about childhood in the past. This includes histories of racism and imperialism. Using the space of the museum to critically evaluate what and how children’s knowledge and perception of the world and their place in it was shaped highlights the extent to which British imperialism and its corresponding beliefs in racial and civilizational superiority underpinned so many aspects of British childhood in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Historians have long noted that museums of childhood are primarily sites for nostalgia for adults for a remembered past that was

simpler, when they were not forced to confront the uncomfortable experience of power and racial difference (Brookshaw, 2017, p. 9). In this way, claims of childhood innocence are racialized as White because innocence of prejudice, discrimination, and disadvantage was the privilege of affluent, White children. They were not the experience of the majority and so it was White childhoods and innocence who had to be protected from oppressive structures which often constituted everyday life for children of color and working-class children (Bernstein, 2011). Indeed, clinging to a nostalgic perception of childhood as universal and therefore not structured by racial hierarchies may make museums of childhood the most difficult museums to decolonize, and the most resistant to change.

However, as Roberts (2006) has argued, nostalgia can be used for educative purposes and curators of childhood exhibitions should not be afraid to be more intellectually ambitious. Museums have the potential to be “brave spaces” of learning, rather than celebrations of the past, a place of intergenerational communication as adults recognize the significance of their own, their parents and their grandparents’ structures of racialized learning and the impact that this had on their adult thinking patterns. Seeing museums of childhood as a pedagogical space to look beyond nostalgic reminiscences to consider the more negative aspect of children’s experiences will be unsettling and controversial, but will provide a space for more productive conversations, not only about race and power, but also about childhood, children, and learning in the past, and encourage important conversations between children and the lived experience earlier generations, particularly as the museum visitors become increasingly diverse.

Children in Museums

However, it is also important to recognize the limitations of museums as places of learning for children, even as the messages they convey are worth deconstructing. Many scholars working on public history, whether the politics of statue removal or the impact of the imperial museum make assumptions that the messages conveyed by adults were the ones that were heard by children. Museums of childhood are widely recognized by historians of childhood to represent the “imperial practices of adults” rather than “native practices of children,” particularly reflecting adult control over children’s lives, education, and behavior. The objects in a museum of childhood reveal what children were given to play with, but not how they were played with or whether children enjoyed it (Brookshaw, 2009, p. 379). Children can absorb cultural agendas as intended by adults, but they equally form their own meanings or merely ignore the ideas of adults (Wilkie, 2000, p. 103). There is little evidence that any but the most studious child looks in the cases of dolls, reads the descriptions, or remembers the content more than 5 min after leaving which is why the overall impression is so significant.

Children’s reactions to imperial museums such as the Lovett exhibitions can be found in *The Times* newspaper reports. An article on the Whitehall Art Gallery exhibition suggested that the dolls were so fascinating that they inspired two reactions, either awe and interest at an exotic object or “the healthy desire to get these toys out and play with them” (“Dolls from Other Lands,” 1916). Again, it again reinforces the idea that the universal work of children is play, and suggests children were engaging with the exhibits

and being confronted by representations of difference and exoticism. However, the controversy in 1923 over the role and place of children in the V&A suggests that their educative value was often limited. In January, a visitor wrote a letter of complaint to *The Times* in which he highlighted “the mistake of allowing uncontrolled children to infest our national collections” (“Points from Letters,” 1923a, January 8, p. 6). He suggested that children were suited to parks and to playing but had no place in museums as places of learning: “the shouts, the running, the playing of games of hundreds of urchins amongst the priceless treasures of the Victoria & Albert Museum is a sore experience.” This provoked furious responses in the comments section, with some supporting the warders as they struggled to “protect the exhibits and keep order” (Landor, 1923, p. 6) whereas others recognized the need to “encourage” children to engage with the fascinating artifacts and the “atmosphere” of learning (“Points from Letters,” 1923c, January 19, p. 6) and suggested that any “inconvenience” was “justified” if it encouraged in children “a longing to know more or to live more beautifully” (Landor, 1923, p. 6). Others complained of children “shrieking” and suggested that the museum was used as “a convenient playground by hordes of noisy urchins, who take no interest whatsoever in the collections” (“Points from Letters,” 1923b, January 17, p. 12). This appears to be rooted in opposition to poor children in museums, the use of terms such as “urchin” or “a gang of unruly street Arabs [*sic*],” in itself a racialized slur (Landor, 1923, p. 6), highlighted their class background as well as behavior as if the two were mutually reinforcing. Lovett may have intended a museum for children but for most of the public, children had to behave in prescribed ways, to suitably appreciate “learning,” for while the outdoors was suitable for all children, indoor learning and leisure spaces carried with them assumptions of appropriate, almost adult, behaviors among the child visitors.

The controversy over children in museums in 1923 shows the potential and the limitations of museums as an educational resource. For all the deferential school trips to look at objects, we should not overestimate the extent to which children look at or remember either the objects or the explanations, and we should never underestimate the capacity of children to create their own meanings from adult spaces or displays, to disrupt narratives, to play, to use these spaces in ways that adults deem inappropriate. As my own children reminded me at a museum recently, “we are experts at making boring places fun.” While we must remain concerned about the messages portrayed, we need to be cautious not to ascribe too much power to the impact of adult storytelling and knowledge production, and not underestimate the subversion of children. It is important to question the extent to which children believe, listen to, or appropriate the values and hierarchies of adults as a result of looking at dolls in glass cases. Lovett’s doll collections could be differently silent or be noisy with different audiences. It is important to recognize the limitations of its discursive power, but also thinking of appropriate ways to use these dolls to stimulate more challenging discussions.

Conclusion

It becomes ever more important that museums are places of learning, places where both children and adults from all communities can come and begin to understand the past, and recognize the barriers, priorities, and prejudices of previous generations.

This happens not merely through observing material artifacts from the past, but understanding historical collecting strategies, the motivations behind the individuals involved and the context in which these objects were displayed. These details help us to understand the worldviews of our forebears, and to challenge them. Museums speak to our own historical moment too and have the potential to provide places of challenge or disruption, brave spaces to learn across generations. The Lovett collection shows that although museums of childhood are nostalgic spaces and provide comforting stories of the past, of certainty and of progress, a closer analysis suggests that even in supposedly innocent childhood collections children learned what it meant to be White, what it meant to “own” an empire, and learned to situate the British ability to collect and catalogue within a wider picture of scientific discovery, progress and power, all of which was based on the assumption of White superiority. Unpicking these assumptions can be profoundly disconcerting, but can help to provide current generations with the tools to discuss, learn, challenge existing racial, and other hierarchies, to recognize how mutually incompatible ideas of universality of childhood and of racial hierarchy can be held together, can inform educational policy, can highlight the historical roots of contemporary discrimination, and can challenge children’s views about society in ways that could change the future.

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