Exhibition Review

Pao-Yi Yang

***Unfinished Pasts: Return, Keep, or…?,* Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 9 May 2025 – 3 January 2027**

How can museum exhibitions enable visitors to critically engage with the complex histories of colonial collections and reflect on their potential (re)distribution? The Wereldmuseum Amsterdam's *Unfinished Pasts: Return, Keep, or…?* brings this question into curatorial focus.[1] Moving beyond a binary of retention and restitution, the exhibition highlights conflicting claims, ongoing debates, and diverging values mobilized by different stakeholders in relation to colonial collections. This review assesses how its interpretive design both deepens and complicates the viewing experience.

Unfinished Pasts opens with two showcases in which objects are organized by type and cultural-geographical region, recalling the Museum's origins as an ethnographic institution that bolstered colonial propaganda (Figure 1).[2] Visitors then enter the exhibition's main gallery, where 200 historical pieces are grouped into seven themes: 'It Was the Law at the Time?', 'Colonial Trade', 'Colonial Collecting', 'Scientific Collections', 'Missionary Collections', 'Is a Gift Just a Gift?', and 'Restitution'. The exhibition also features a selection of works by contemporary artists (Figures 2-4). Visitors can navigate these subjects in any order, engaging with questions of legitimate ownership, the impact of colonial expansion on European academic disciplines such as anthropology, the politics underlying gift-giving and missionary collecting, and recent developments in Dutch restitution policy and practice.

Figure 1 Showcase with objects in an ethnographic arrangement. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Figure 2 Gallery view of Unfinished Pasts. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Figure 3 To Make One Particle by Pansee Atta with caption 'Please Interact. How might this collection be organized?', installed near the exhibition's entrance. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Figure 4 Gallery view featuring Monster (van Hollandabad) (2025) by Hande Sever and Gelare Khoshgozaran. Filmed on-site in several Dutch museums and their depots, the video interrogates museological narratives and forms of appropriation constructed around cultural artifacts from West Asia and North Africa. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Each theme is framed through three textual layers: first, overhead subject panels presenting a cascading set of questions that reveal the entangled perspectives at play; second, thematic captions offering deeper contextualization; and third, individual object labels (Figure 5). Together, these texts form an interpretive framework that exposes the varied motivations and ideologies underlying colonial dispossession and renders seemingly incontrovertible acquisitions arguable. For example, 'It Was the Law at the Time?' unsettles the contention that looting was consonant with colonial jurisprudence (Figure 6). Among the objects on display is an Ethiopian altar stone donated to the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (today the Wereldmuseum Leiden) in 1869 by J.F.C. Prince, who claimed to have purchased it from a local priest (Figure 7). However, as the object's label reminds viewers, given Prince's involvement as a Dutch officer in the 1868 British expedition to Ethiopia, doubt persists as to whether this was a genuinely reciprocal transaction or an involuntary transfer under military duress.

Figure 5 Presentation under 'Colonial Trade', showing the three-layered textual materials. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Figure 6 Subject panel 'It Was the Law at the Time?' presenting five questions: 'Looted, plundered, taken?', 'What is looting and what role did looting play in the making of museum collections during colonialism?', 'Was looting legal at the time?', 'If it was, according to whom was it legal, and under whose laws?', and 'How do we deal with looted objects in museum collections in the present?'. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Figure 7 Showcase with an altar stone from Adigrat, Ethiopia. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Beyond military actors, the exhibition highlights missionaries and museum professionals as two other key drivers of colonial extraction. 'Missionary Collections' presents objects acquired from the Dutch Spiritan Jan Vissers (1916–1989) and the Utrecht Missionary Society, arguing that converted colonized groups were required to surrender religious and customary items, which

were then destroyed or transferred to European museums as evidence of idolatry. ‘Colonial Collecting’ features correspondence from Lindor Serrurier (1846–1901), director of Leiden’s Museum of Ethnology from 1880 to 1896, addressed to Dutch East Indies officers in Batavia and Western Borneo (Figure 8). In these letters, Serrurier explicitly solicits their assistance in procuring looted objects and human remains to expand the museum’s holdings. Displayed beside the letters, a round shield bears witness to this complicity (Figure 9). Used during the uprising of overseas Chinese miners in Western Borneo against Dutch authorities, the shield was confiscated during the Dutch suppression of 1884 and gifted to the Museum in 1886.

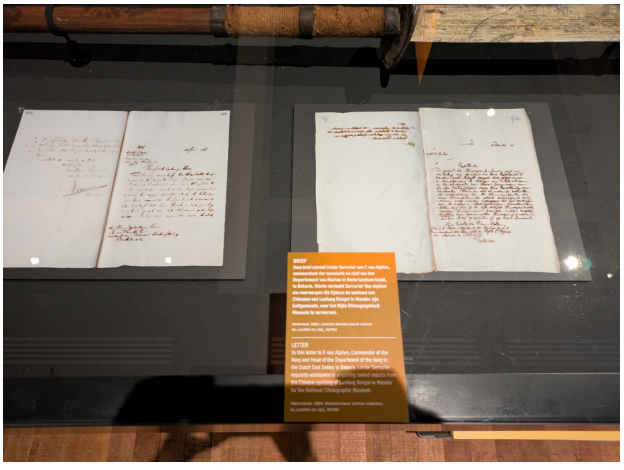

Figure 8 Letters from Lindor Serrurier to: (left) B. van Zutphen, Resident of the Western Division of Borneo, in 1884; (right) F. van Alphen, Commander of the Navy and Head of the Department of the Navy in the Dutch East Indies in Batavia, also in 1884. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Figure 9 Showcase with a round shield made of woven rattan, confiscated by the Dutch from the Lanfang Republic (蘭芳共和國, also known as Lanfang Kongsi 蘭芳公司, a confederacy established by Chinese miners in Western Borneo in 1777) on 6 October 1884. Displayed together with the shield is a seal used by the Lanfang Republic. The overhead panel presents two questions: ‘How did objects enter the collections of European museums?’ and ‘Who were the main actors in their creation?’ Photographed by the author, September 2025.

The exhibition lays bare the contentious roots of ostensibly secure acquisitions, prompting a broader reassessment of the concise format typically found in public-facing online collection records. The exhibition's nuanced readings of the altar stone and rattan shield, for instance, depart from the museum's online inventories, where the provenances of both objects are listed simply with donation dates.[3] This contrast raises awareness of whether, and to what extent, potentially fraught provenances should be made publicly accessible.

Among colonial acquisitions, the most ethically fraught holdings are human remains. How, if indeed at all, should museums preserve and display them today? Showcased under 'Scientific Collections' are three facial casts of Katumbukha, one of 64 Nias individuals whose faces, frowning with eyes sealed, were modelled in plaster by Dutch anthropologist J.P. Kleiweg de Zwaan (1875–1971) in 1910 for racial measurement (Figure 10). The label points out that this 'face-printing' process was 'painful and inhuman', impelling viewers to see these plaster casts not as neutral scientific tools but as visceral tokens of colonial trauma. The label asks, 'Can we also see these casts as ancestral remains?' while implicitly answering in the affirmative by noting that the casts are shown with prior consent from Katumbukha's descendants, a restorative measure that re-humanizes the dehumanized. Juxtaposed with these three 'faces' are two photographs of Nias men in warrior attire, their gaze unflinching (Figure 11). This visual pairing powerfully illustrates how Nias individuals, their bodies and self-identities, were objectified and reduced to inert (sur)faces.

Figure 10 Showcase with three facial casts of Katumbukha. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Figure 11 Photographs of two Nias men in warrior attire, displayed alongside three facial casts of Katumbukha. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Of particular note is how the exhibition complicates debates surrounding the ownership of human remains and cultural objects by identifying a plurality of stakeholders and, in doing so, avoids reducing repatriation to a binary colonizer-colonized power struggle. Installed adjacent to Katumbukha's facial casts is a large-scale graphic wall featuring a request submitted by Mixtec researchers and activists together with the Yuku Saa Community Museum, endorsed by 1,020 signatures from residents of Tututepec, calling on Mexican authorities to support the return of a turquoise-mosaic skull (Figure 12). Previously held by the Wereldmuseum Leiden, this ancestral skull was handed over by the Dutch government to the Mexican embassy in The Hague in 2024, a manoeuvre that, as the exhibition underlines, 'bypass[ed] Indigenous-led efforts'. By presenting this call for the skull's further return to the Tututepec community, the installation prompts broader rumination on the unfinished journeys of restituted objects: to whom objects should ultimately be returned, and how restituted heritage can be prevented from being subjected to a renewed gaze of the powerful.

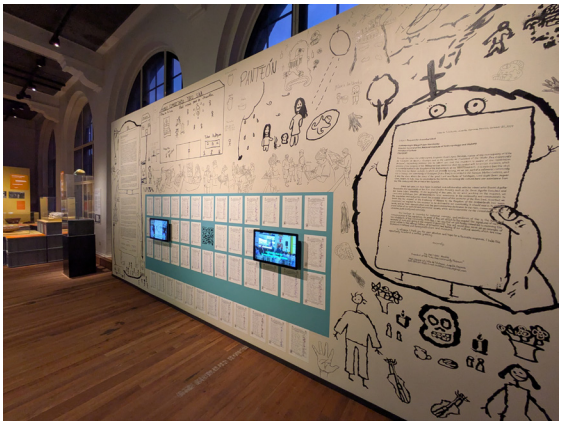

Figure 12 Graphic wall with a reproduced request letter from Izaira López Sánchez, Dr Omar Aguilar Sánchez, and Daniel Aguilar Ruvalcaba, together with the director and curator of the Yuku Saa Community Museum, accompanied by 1,020 signatures from Tututepec residents, calling on the Mexican government to return the turquoise-mosaic ancestral skull. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Saturated with reflective questions and multiple perspectives, the exhibition lays fertile ground for educators to facilitate discussion. This profusion of information may nonetheless prove challenging for general visitors, a difficulty compounded by the absence of an audio guide. The rich texts demand slow digestion, yet the opacity of the object arrangement at times verges on cognitive overload. Given the exhibition's thematic structure, one anticipates a coherent correspondence between grouped objects and framed subjects; however, in some cases, such alignment appears tenuous due to a gap between individual object labels and thematic inquiries.

Consider the presentation under 'Is a Gift Just a Gift?' (Figure 13). Its thematic caption adopts a critical stance:

> To understand the role that gift-giving and purchase played in the creation of collections, we need to grasp the underlying power structures and intentions that underpinned the exchanges of gifts and goods in the context of colonial hierarchies and inequalities. […] If a chief made a precious gift to a colonial official, this may have been part of a political strategy to maintain dignity. If someone in precarious, impoverished living conditions sold an object to a colonial collector to survive, this sale is not simply voluntary. Objects that entered colonial collections as gifts and goods remain uncertain belongings.

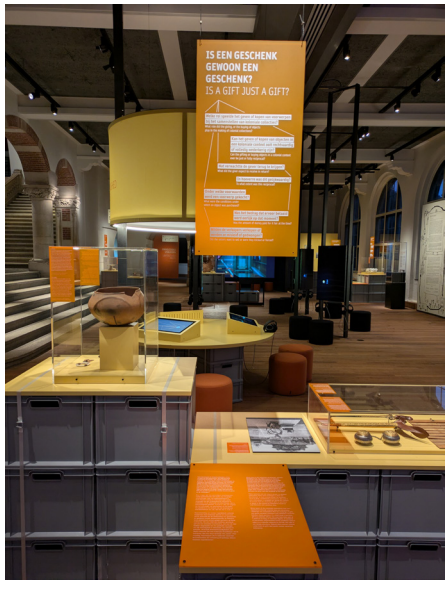

Figure 13 View of the section 'Is a Gift Just a Gift?'. The overhead panel presents seven questions: 'What role did the giving or the buying of objects play in the making of colonial collections?', 'Can the gifting or buying of objects in a colonial context ever be just or fully reciprocal?', 'What did the giver expect to receive in return?', 'To what extent was this reciprocal?', 'What were the conditions under which an object was purchased?', 'Was the amount of money paid for it fair at the time?', and 'Did the sellers want to sell or were they tricked or forced?'. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Among the objects on display are, to name a few: a kris gifted by the Yogyakarta court to Governor-General Duymaer van Twist (1809–1887) in 1852, a year after his appointment; a lontar-leaf manuscript presented by Buleleng's high priest to Governor-General J.P. Count of Limburg-Stirum (1873–1948) in 1918 to request financial aid for the restoration of the Besakih temple after an earthquake; and a milk bowl sent to the 1862 International Exhibition in London by King Moshoeshoe of Basutoland (today's Lesotho) (1786–1870). Each object is labelled with its giver, recipient, date, and gifting occasion, but, despite the diverse contexts of gifting these objects represent, the labels do not articulate how each piece constitutes an 'uncertain belonging' in relation to the politicized manoeuvres and power asymmetries governing its exchange, leaving the overall presentation somewhat unmoored. This sense of ambiguity is further amplified by the inclusion of a shell armband and necklace from Papua New Guinea (Figure 14). The label explains that in the Kula exchange ritual, necklaces and armbands circulate in opposing directions across the archipelago, making gifting a means to strengthen social ties. What remains unclear, however, is the curatorial rationale for juxtaposing the Kula ritual with forms of gift-giving shaped by colonial power dynamics. As the only objects in this grouping not identified as gifts to colonial authorities, they raise the question of whether they are meant to represent a gifting practice untainted by colonialism; further curatorial clarification on this point would be beneficial.

Figure 14 Showcase with a shell necklace and armband from Papua New Guinea, displayed together with the Basutoland milk bowl. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

While the interpretive design of *Unfinished Pasts* can be demanding, it offers rich educational insights into how colonial acquisitions can be positioned in today's museum landscape. Building on these insights, the exhibition holds potential to involve visitors more actively by expanding its interactive elements. It already employs interactive touchscreens in a dedicated station, presenting detailed provenance timelines and ownership histories for selected objects (Figure 15). Beyond this, the interface could be extended across thematic groups to invite visitors to explore how they might display and interpret contested objects, as well as the context-specific debates and dilemmas their choices entail. This approach could foster a more tailored and nuanced form of participation.

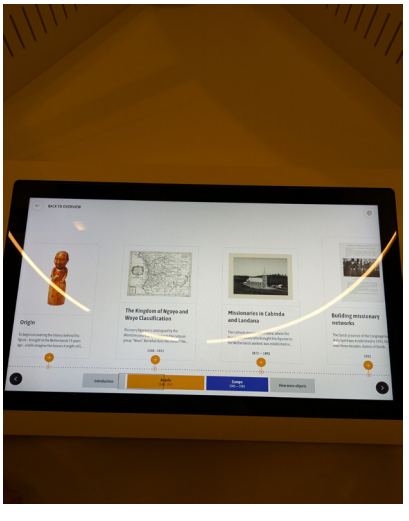

Figure 15 Interactive screen showing the provenance timeline of a Woyo ivory figurine, from the early sixteenth century to the late twentieth century. Photographed by the author, September 2025.

Notes

[1] Formerly known as the Tropenmuseum (Tropical Museum), the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam (World Museum Amsterdam) adopted its current name in 2023. Since 2014, it has shared its collections under a joint agreement with the Wereldmuseum Leiden (formerly the National Museum of Ethnology) and the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. *Unfinished Pasts* features objects from all three institutions, as well as loans from other museums. The exhibition stems from the research program Pressing Matter (2021–2025), developed by the Wereldmuseum (Amsterdam, Leiden, and Rotterdam) and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in collaboration with a wide range of cultural and research institutions in the Netherlands and beyond. For more about the program, see: Pressing Matter, 'Pressing Matter: Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums', Pressing Matter [n.d.]. https://pressingmatter.nl/, accessed 19 December 2025.

[2] The Wereldmuseum Amsterdam traces its origins to 1864, when the Society for the Promotion of Industry founded the Museum of East and West Indies Natural Resources in Haarlem to collect specimens and materials from overseas colonies. In 1871, it became the Colonial Museum, promoting the benefits of colonialism and trade, with much of its collection drawn from private holdings brought back by Dutch colonizers and missionaries. The Museum moved to its current building in Amsterdam in 1926. After Indonesia declared independence in 1945, it was renamed the Indies Museum to reflect changing political circumstances and maintain positive ties with the former colony. This name lasted until 1950, when the Dutch government recognized Indonesian sovereignty, and the Museum became the Tropenmuseum. In 2023, it adopted its present name, the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.

[3] Wereldmuseum, 'Altaarsteen', Wereldmuseum [n.d.]. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/595619, accessed 19 December 2025; Wereldmuseum, 'Schild', Wereldmuseum [n.d.] https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/662439, accessed 19 December 2025.

***Pao-Yi Yang** specializes in the collection and exhibition histories of Chinese art, with a broader interest in how institutional and socio-political forces shape exhibition narratives. She is currently a project researcher working with the Special Collections of Leiden University Libraries and has served as a lecturer at Leiden University and a provenance researcher at the Wereldmuseum's Research Center for Material Culture.