



72 Dragons Arts



## Colonial history is a problem for Birmingham's museum

The athletes from the 72 countries and territories that were once colonised by the British empire competed in the UK Commonwealth Games. Portraying the tension of a joyful sports event that, at its core, honours a British historical period that many in the art community and beyond feel is incongruous and problematic.

*As Birmingham's artistic and cultural sectors figure out how to contextualise the Commonwealth in the face of Britain's ongoing grappling with colonial legacies, this becomes startlingly clear in their replies. The best example of this can be found in Victoria Square, the very centre of Birmingham, where an iconic statue of Queen Victoria, the Queen who oversaw Britain's frequently violent discovery of the world beyond our borders, has been dramatically reconfigured by artist Hew Locke on commission from the nearby Ikon Gallery.*

Visitors to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery enter the museum through Locke's reinterpretation of the British monarchy. This civic museum, which has been under new management and is undergoing a dramatic reconfiguration, has a public image for being rather staid and traditional for much of its recent history.

Contemporary photography, conceptual art, and pre-made sculptures are just a few of the sorts of art and heritage that greet visitors to the museum today. Temporary displays further along in the space evoke Birmingham's current rave scene as well as



the minority alliances that battled neo-Nazism on the streets of Birmingham and other UK cities in the 1970s and 1980s.

Under the joint direction of Zak Mensah and Sara Wajid and with the assistance of director of collections Toby Watley, the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is setting the standard for a new model that is unmatched by any other significant museum in the UK. 'Museums are changing, and we're determined to lead in that, we have to stay relevant. Otherwise we're facing a slow death,' - Mensah says.

**Reference:**

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/07/29/commonwealth-games-birmingham-museums-legacy-colonialism>

