

Details of proposed Open Session:

Title:

Colonial Crafts: Before and After Display

Organizer:

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Abstract:

In recent years, craftwork and artisanry have re-emerged as an area of focus in the History of Technology, a field which for decades almost exclusively dealt with high-tech, spectacular, institutionalized technology. Add to this the meteoric rise of global histories of connections and cross-fertilizations, and local technological lifeworlds of the Global South are finally being projected onto the technological landscape. Still, most studies of crafts from a global perspective have not gone beyond pure representations. A contextual history of craftwork must admittedly include colonial exhibitions as hyperbolic spaces, wherein particular images of colony and Empire were constructed through the objectification of "life, labour, and language" (Foucault, *The Order of Things*). However, just as important as the nature of such objectifications (i.e., the ontological dimension) are the processes by which colonial spectators rationalized, socialized and familiarized themselves with new forms: native arts and artefacts (i.e., the epistemological dimension).

Many recent studies on colonial exhibitions, ranging from Political History to Cultural Anthropology, have explored the politics of display, emphasizing the invention of truth(s) in the encyclopaedic galleries. But barring a few notable exceptions, little work has been done on (a) the tensions behind inclusion and omission of exhibits, (b) the future social lives of exhibits, and (c) the cross-geographical intellectual appropriation of exhibitions. Focusing on these aspects would mean discussing topics like hybridity (influence of native forms on metropolitan material culture), acculturation (through print and visual media), mimicry (of these exhibitions by colonial subjects to varying political ends), and interpretation (changes in the meanings that actors came to associate with craft and technology).

The proposed panel aims to accumulate scholarship on exhibitions from diverse geographical contexts (with an emphasis on the Global South) to address the above loopholes.
