

Museum axes 15 year old exhibition over concerns of 'racism, sexism and ableism'

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A medical museum in London has closed a fifteen-year-long exhibition citing concerns the exhibit used “racist, sexist and ableist theories and language”.

The exhibition depicted a collection of objects with reference to the medical tradition. Sir Henry Wellcome, the museum's original patron and namesake, was a US-born pharmaceutical tycoon who had built the collection over his lifetime and travels across the globe.

For fifteen years the 'Medicine Man' exhibition has displayed these objects. However, museum staff have decided that contentious objects like a 1916 painting titled "A Medical Missionary Attending to a Sick African" depicting an African person kneeling in front of a white missionary, are part of a history of racist medical intervention which has no place in the museum.

The Wellcome Collection announced its decision in a series of Tweets: “What’s the point of museums? Truthfully, we’re asking ourselves the same question.”

“When our founder, Henry Wellcome started collecting in the 19th century, the aim then was to acquire vast numbers of objects that would enable a better understanding of the art and science of healing throughout the ages.”

“This was problematic for a number of reasons. Who did these objects belong to? How were they acquired? What gave us the right to tell their stories?”

“The result was a collection that told a global story of health and medicine in which disabled people, Black people, Indigenous peoples and people of colour were exoticised, marginalised and exploited – or even missed out altogether.”

It continued that although the exhibition told a story of people “through time and across cultures [seeking] to protect themselves and care for one another,” simultaneously it perpetuates a colonial narrative that of a man who amassed “wealth, power and privilege”.

Some commentators disagree with this assertion, Cathy Young, a cultural studies fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, tweeted: “Did he have advantages as a white male? Sure. But he seems to have been a genuinely brilliant man who rose from humble origins.”