

# Collecting with(in) the city

Publication  
CAMOC & COMCOL  
Conference  
09–11 October 2024

AMSTERDAM X MUSEUM

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# Collecting with(in) the city

**CAMOC & COMCOL  
Conference  
09–11 October 2024**

Collecting with(in) the city  
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**Special thanks to**

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# City Identities – plural narratives

## Two city museums, two collections that tells the history of Montréal with a multivocal approach

Andrea Delaplace

### Biography

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### Introduction

While museums have traditionally focused on preserving tangible and intangible heritage, they now face increasing political, social, and cultural challenges. The recent ICOM debates on redefining museums highlighted their evolving role as spaces for critical dialogue and social justice.

History museums, once shaped by dominant, official narratives, are now embracing multivocality—a shift promoted by social museology since the 1970s. A central challenge remains: integrating dominant national narratives with those of marginalized groups, including Indigenous peoples and immigrant communities.

In light of postcolonial critique and decolonization movements, museums are increasingly recognizing the multiplicity of historical narratives and the need to reflect cultural diversity in their collections and exhibitions. The aim is to examine how museums represent “the other” in contemporary society.

This figure of the “Other” may refer to the immigrant, central to my own research, or to the Indigenous person, historically constructed through colonial narratives such as the “noble savage” and systematically marginalized by structures of domination. In this context, museums hold the potential to serve as spaces for reconciliation and social cohesion, engaging in what may be termed a *museology of reconciliation*—an approach aimed at addressing historical injustices and fostering dialogue in increasingly polarized societies.

The “museology of reconciliation” (Galla, 1995; Guzin-Lukic, 2001) offers a framework for museums to actively engage with multicultural and multiethnic communities. Drawing from social museology (Brulon Soares, 2015), which advocates participatory practices rooted in community engagement, this approach promotes living together as both an ethical commitment and a curatorial method.

Montréal is home to several museums that interpret the city’s history through diverse lenses, including the McCord Stewart Museum, the MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises, Pointe-à-Callière, and Château Ramezay. The McCord Stewart foregrounds social history and Indigenous perspectives within a formerly private collection; the MEM emphasizes oral histories and the plural identities of Montréalers; Pointe-à-Callière offers archaeological insight at the city’s founding site; and Château Ramezay presents a broad narrative from Indigenous prehistory to the modern era. Together, these institutions illustrate how multivocality, reconciliation, and urban heritage converge in contemporary museology.

In this article, I will explore the historical development of the collections of the McCord Stewart and MEM museums, and examine how both are currently engaging in postcolonial approaches to expand their collections—highlighting efforts to include diverse, often marginalized voices in the narrative of Montréal’s heritage.

### 1. Teaching Their Own History in Their Own Words: The Importance of First Peoples' Voices

In Canada, the process of Reconciliation accelerated after 2015, when the government formally acknowledged the harm caused to First Nations by colonial policies. That year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report, based on testimony from over 6,500 witnesses, along with 94 Calls to Action to redress the legacy of residential schools.

In December 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged a “renewed, nation-to-nation relationship” with First Nations, signaling a shift in national discourse. However, critics argue that efforts at Indigenization risk being symbolic—treating Indigenous participation as a means to ease colonial guilt rather than enabling real structural change.

In the museum field, this shift is visible through growing efforts at decolonization (removing colonial frameworks) and Indigenization (integrating Indigenous knowledge and voices) when creating new exhibitions and ways of displaying the permanent collections. These concepts, though distinct, share a common goal: to correct historical exclusions by creating space for Indigenous narratives in exhibitions, collections, and governance. The main key questions that arise:

- How do museums select communities to collaborate with?
- What methods can effectively reach and involve historically marginalized groups?
- How can these relationships be sustained long-term?
- What mistakes have been made—and what can be learned?
- How can reconciliation be meaningfully embedded into institutional structures?
- Museums today must move beyond symbolic gestures and engage in genuine partnerships with Indigenous communities, allowing them to tell their own stories in their own voices.

### 2. Gathered together - The idea of reconciliation and creating respect towards indigenous cultures

Museums have long been complicit in colonial practices, especially through the unethical acquisition of Indigenous artefacts and the silencing of Indigenous voices. These actions often reflected a broader colonial intent: to assert dominance over Indigenous peoples by controlling their material culture and narratives. Today, decolonizing museums means reversing these dynamics by giving voice and authority back to the communities whose heritage is on display.

The Indigenous Heritage Circle (IHC)<sup>1</sup> offers a vital framework for this shift. It defines Indigenous heritage as:

“Complex and dynamic... encompassing ideas, experiences, belongings, artistic expressions, practices, knowledge, and places that are valued because they are culturally meaningful and connected to shared memory. Indigenous heritage cannot be separated from either Indigenous identity or Indigenous life.”<sup>2</sup>

This definition underscores that Indigenous heritage is living and evolving—not frozen in time—and intrinsically tied to identity, land, and memory. It challenges museums to move beyond token inclusion toward ethical collaboration and meaningful representation.

Decolonization, in this context, is not simply about restitution or land rights—it’s about restoring voice, agency, and cultural continuity. It also means educating non-Indigenous publics to foster greater respect, understanding, and accountability. This is where the museum’s role expands: from preservation to dialogue, from authority to shared stewardship.

In Canadian museums, decolonization and Indigenization are increasingly practiced through: land acknowledgements as a standard practice in public programming; revision of terminology, replacing colonial or racist descriptors with culturally accurate language; hiring and inclusion of Indigenous staff in curatorial, leadership, and educational roles; respecting the right to heritage, by aligning with the principles of UNDRIP<sup>3</sup> (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), particularly regarding community control over cultural material; provenance research and digital repatriation, ensuring Indigenous peoples can access and interpret their heritage; Institutional reforms, aimed at dismantling systemic racism, oppression, and exclusion at all levels of museum operations. Nonetheless, several critical questions persist and warrant further examination:

- How can cultural institutions establish trust-based, long-term partnerships with Indigenous communities?
- What frameworks or mechanisms can ensure that inclusion moves beyond symbolic gestures to become structurally embedded within institutional practices?
- In what ways can museums confront and take responsibility for their colonial legacies, and what does meaningful accountability entail in this context?

These are not quick fixes, but ongoing processes. At the heart of reconciliation is the act of listening and thus amplifying Indigenous voices not as subjects of history, but as co-authors of a shared future. In this way, museums can become spaces not just for exhibiting culture, but for co-creating it.

### 3. The Montreal Social History Museum: Musée McCord Stewart

The McCord Stewart Museum, originally founded in 1921 by David Ross McCord to house his family's private collection, has since evolved into a major institution with extensive holdings. Over the past century, the museum has significantly expanded its collections, which now encompass diverse aspects of Montréal's social history, its role within Québec and Canada, and the ongoing presence and vitality of Indigenous cultures.

As a social history museum, the McCord Stewart has increasingly adopted a decolonial approach, particularly through long-standing collaborations with Indigenous communities dating back to the early 20th century. Contemporary initiatives reflect a shift in curatorial practice: exhibitions focusing on Indigenous cultures are now co-created with Indigenous partners, centring their voices, perspectives, and historical narratives. Moreover, the museum is actively re-evaluating its collections practices; the documentation and interpretation of objects are now conducted in direct dialogue with Indigenous representatives, ensuring cultural accuracy, accountability, and shared authority in knowledge production.

At the McCord Stewart Museum in Montréal, Jonathan Lainey, curator of Indigenous collections at the McCord Stewart Museum and a member of the Huron-Wendat Nation, plays a central role in advancing decolonial museological practices. With a background in history and deep expertise in Indigenous heritage, Lainey advocates for collaborative curatorial approaches that respect and centre Indigenous voices. His work aligns closely with the influence of Élisabeth Kaine, whose contributions to community-based museology—particularly through her leadership at *La Boîte Rouge Vif*—have significantly shaped the museum's engagement with Indigenous communities. Kaine's methodologies, grounded in co-creation and cultural self-representation, have informed McCord's efforts to not only reframe its existing collections but also develop new exhibitions in partnership with Indigenous knowledge holders. Together, Lainey and Kaine exemplify a shift toward inclusive, ethically grounded museology in the context of reconciliation and Indigenous cultural resurgence. (See figure 1)

As part of my postdoctoral research, I had the opportunity to interview Jonathan Lainey and he emphasized the importance of establishing respectful, long-term relationships with Indigenous communities and highlighted the museum's commitment to co-creation. In this context, he pointed to the pivotal role of Élisabeth Kaine, as a leading figure in the development of co-creative museological practices in Québec. Kaine's work with *La Boîte Rouge Vif*<sup>6</sup> has been instrumental in shaping methodologies that prioritize Indigenous voices, knowledge systems, and modes of representation. Her approach to collaborative and decolonial practices has served as a model for institutions like the McCord Stewart Museum and the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec city, demonstrating how collaborative frameworks can lead to more ethical, inclusive, and culturally grounded museum practices.

*La Boîte Rouge Vif* is an Indigenous-led cultural organisation based in Québec that specializes in community engagement, heritage preservation, and participatory museology. Founded in 2004 and closely linked to the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC), it works primarily with First Nations communities, particularly the Innu, to develop projects that promote Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and ways of seeing the world.

The organisation is best known for its innovative approach to social museology (or “museology from within” as they call it), where Indigenous communities actively lead the research, interpretation, and presentation of their own heritage. It uses multimedia tools, immersive installations, and traveling exhibitions to support cultural transmission and intergenerational dialogue. It plays a significant role in the broader movement toward decolonizing museums and rethinking heritage practices in Québec and Canada, prioritizing Indigenous agency and voice at every stage of cultural work.

As an example, between 2010 and 2013, *La Boîte Rouge Vif*, in collaboration with the Musée de la civilisation in Québec, led an extensive consultation tour involving the eleven Indigenous Nations of Québec. Nearly 700 participants took part in this unprecedented initiative, resulting in a vast cultural repertoire: over 5,000 pages of transcribed testimonies, 250 hours of video recordings, and 10,000 photographs.

This project gave voice to individuals across generations, genders, and areas of interest, creating a vivid and multifaceted self-portrait of their cultures and the contemporary challenges they face. Within this rich corpus, the living heritage of each Nation comes to life—through landscapes, stories, and experiences. The words of First Nations and Inuit participants form the core of the project, accompanied by powerful photographic documentation. Together, they convey a profound wisdom—one that reflects on the past while envisioning the future.

In 2023, Jonathan Lainey curated the significant exhibition “Wampum: Beads of Diplomacy.” This exhibition explored the historical, political, and cultural meanings of wampum belts—objects of deep importance for many Indigenous nations in Eastern North America. By presenting these belts not merely as artifacts, but as living records of diplomacy, alliances, and oral traditions, Lainey challenged conventional museological approaches and emphasized Indigenous epistemologies. His curatorial vision, informed by both scholarly and community-based knowledge, reflects a broader institutional shift at the McCord Stewart Museum toward decolonial practice and co-creation with Indigenous partners. (See figure 2)

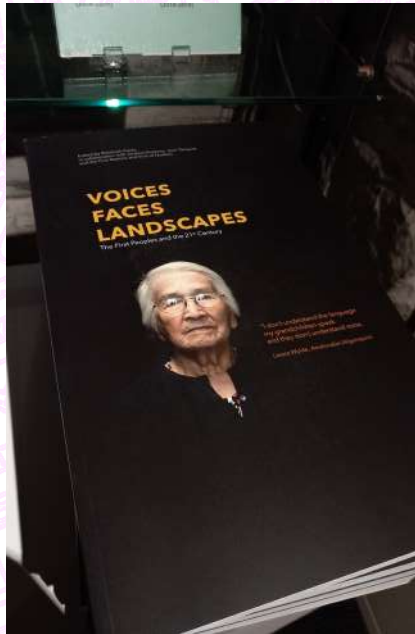


Figure 1: Book by la Boite Rouge Vif dedicated to co-creation with Indigenous communities



Figure 2: Entrance of McCord Museum Exhibition

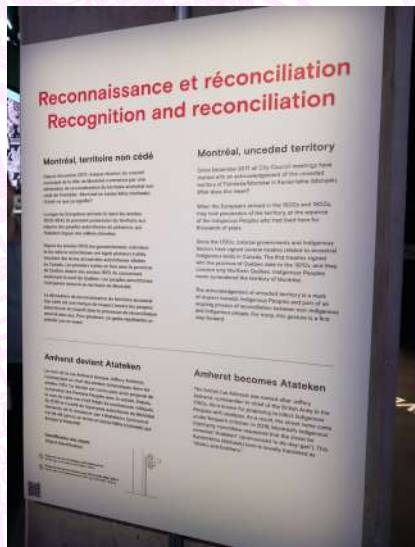


Figure 3: Photo MEM 2024 - Recognition and Reconciliation in Montreal



Figure 4: Forum open to all inhabitants of Montreal at the MEM

**4. The MEM : “You are the history of Montreal, together let’s talk about you!”**

The MEM - Centre des mémoires montréalaises (re)opened in September 2023 with new name, location and exhibitions. But this institution has a long history connecting with its local communities in Montréal. The Centre d’histoire de Montréal (previous name of the same institution) was created in 1983. How to collect the city’s histories through the memories of its inhabitants that’s the proposition of the MEM (that is already imprinted in the museum’s own name).

At the MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises, the central objective is to reflect the plural identities that constitute the fabric of Montréal, including the histories and ongoing presence of Indigenous communities. Any city museum that seeks to narrate the history of Montréal must necessarily engage with Indigenous heritage as an integral component of local identity. The MEM’s collection is primarily composed of oral histories and objects from popular culture, emphasizing everyday experiences and diverse perspectives. This approach invites Montréalers to revisit their own history through the lens of others, fostering a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of the city’s past and present. (See figure 3)

The forum located at the entrance of the MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises functions as an open, accessible space designed to welcome all citizens, whether they wish to visit the exhibitions, have a coffee, or simply spend time in a communal environment. This space reflects the museum’s core philosophy: it is not only about the inhabitants of Montréal, but first and foremost, a museum *for* them. The forum fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging by offering free access to amenities such as seating areas and temporary exhibitions—such as *A Mile in My Shoes*<sup>6</sup> (on view from February 27, 2024, to August 31, 2025)—without the requirement of purchasing admission. In doing so, the museum affirms its commitment to civic engagement, social accessibility, and the democratization of cultural spaces.

The MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises is a museum primarily focused on oral history from the 20th and 21st centuries. Its temporary exhibitions—such as *Détours*—highlight the cultural and religious diversity of Montréal’s neighborhoods through the personal narratives of its residents. By foregrounding individual and community voices, the museum plays a critical role in preserving and interpreting Montréal’s cultural and historical heritage. It serves as a platform for exploring the multiplicity of experiences that have shaped the city, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among its diverse communities.

This approach illustrates how Montréal offers a compelling model for representing urban history through multiple perspectives. Whether through the McCord Stewart Museum, which has transitioned from a private collection to a socially engaged institution foregrounding Indigenous voices and heritage, or through MEM’s emphasis on memory, oral testimony, and community participation, these institutions collectively underscore the importance of inclusive museological practices. At the heart of MEM’s mission is the commitment to documenting personal and collective experiences, particularly those of historically marginalized groups, thereby contributing to a richer and more equitable understanding of the city’s identity. (See figure 4)

### Multivocal Approaches in Montréal's City Museums: Towards a Museology of Reconciliation

This paper examined two Montréal museums—the McCord Stewart Museum and the MEM—Centre des mémoires montréalaises—as examples of multivocal approaches to city history. While the MEM, supported by the City of Montréal, focuses on popular culture and oral histories from the 20th and 21st centuries, it integrates Indigenous heritage through toponymy and testimonies of Indigenous citizens, despite lacking a dedicated Indigenous collection. This reflects an inclusive, community-based museology committed to representing the city's diverse identities.

In contrast, the McCord Stewart Museum, originally founded in 1921 from a private collection, demonstrates how a legacy institution can engage in decolonial practices. Through sustained collaboration with Indigenous communities, the hiring of Indigenous staff, and co-curated exhibitions—such as the recent *Wampum* exhibit curated by Jonathan Lainey—the museum reinterprets its collections with a view to restorative narrative justice.

Both institutions embody distinct yet complementary models of city museums—one centered on oral memory and contemporary life, the other on historical material culture recontextualized through Indigenous perspectives. Together, they show how plural narratives can be harnessed to foster dialogue and inclusivity.

This curatorial evolution unfolds within a broader social context marked by increasing polarization. Contemporary societies face growing divisions around immigration, gender, systemic racism, and economic insecurity—particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising living costs. In this climate, history and society museums can play a conciliatory role by fostering intercultural understanding and dialogue.

As the McCord Stewart Museum states, its goal is to “initiate a dialogue for better mutual understanding,”<sup>77</sup> while the MEM aspires to “bring the city to life through a multiplicity of perspectives.”<sup>78</sup> Both affirm the potential of museums to act as civic spaces for plural memory and shared futures.

In conclusion, both the McCord Stewart Museum and the MEM—Centre des mémoires montréalaises exemplify evolving museological practices that foreground inclusion, dialogue, and multivocality in narrating the history of Montréal. Their respective approaches—one rooted in participatory oral history, the other in decolonizing historical collections—illustrate how city museums can serve as platforms for cultural pluralism and social cohesion. They also embody, in different ways, the principles of a museology of reconciliation, offering space for marginalized voices and contributing to the broader project of rethinking heritage in a fractured society.

However, a critical evaluation of these practices reveals ongoing challenges. Key among them is the question of power and agency: How influential are Indigenous individuals and communities in shaping museum narratives and curatorial decisions? To what extent is their participation structural rather than symbolic? While the hiring of Indigenous curators, such as Jonathan Lainey at the McCord, and partnerships with institutions like La Boîte Rouge Vif signal meaningful progress, the sustainability of these networks remains uncertain.

Additionally, the dependency of museums on national and provincial policy frameworks raises concerns about continuity. What happens to these collaborative efforts if political priorities shift? Will institutional commitments to reconciliation and decolonization persist in the absence of supportive policy environments?

These questions underscore the necessity for museums not only to engage with communities but also to embed those relationships into their institutional structures. Moving forward, museums must work towards governance models that guarantee Indigenous authority and continuity, irrespective of changing political landscapes. Only through such structural transformations can the promise of multivocal and reconciliatory museology be fully realized.

### Notes

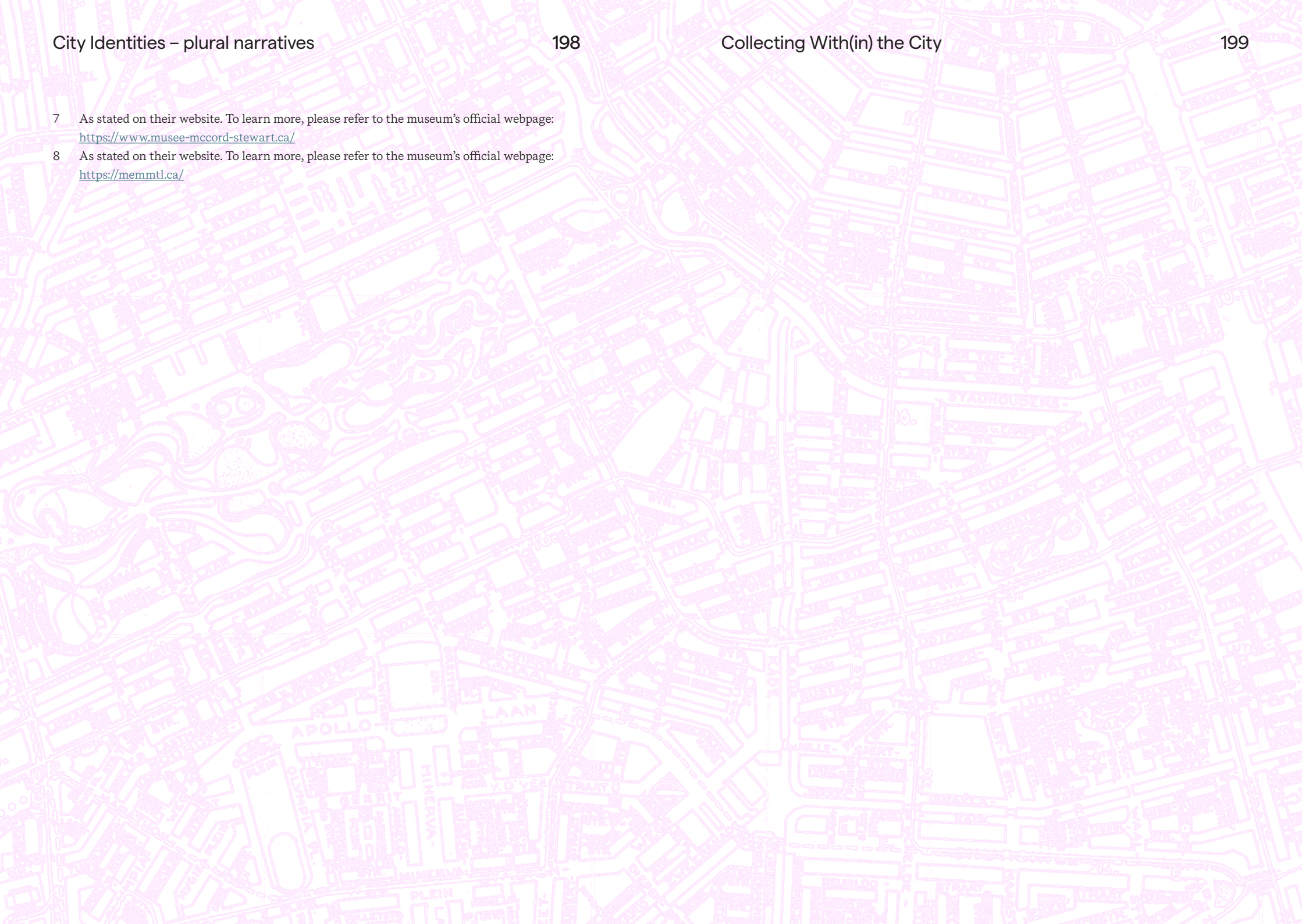
- 1 The Indigenous Heritage Circle is a national Indigenous-led organization in Canada that advocates for the recognition, protection, and promotion of Indigenous heritage in all its forms. It aims to support Indigenous communities in safeguarding their cultural heritage and provides guidance to institutions on best practices for respectful and collaborative engagement. The IHC defines Indigenous heritage as complex, dynamic, and inseparable from Indigenous identity and life—encompassing ideas, practices, belongings, knowledge, and places rooted in shared memory and cultural meaning. For more information on the Indigenous Heritage Circle: <https://indigenousheritage.ca/>
- 2 This definition of Indigenous heritage, developed by members of the Indigenous circle, is rooted in the beliefs and values of Indigenous communities. Complex and dynamic, it embraces ideas, experiences, belongings, artistic expressions, practices, knowledge, and places that hold cultural meaning and connect to shared memory, inseparable from Indigenous identity and life.
- 3 For the full declaration please check here: [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf)
- 4 For more info on this organisation please check their website: <https://www.laboiterougevif.com/>
- 5 It was also present at the genesis of CAMOC in 1993 at the Museum of London.
- 6 The exhibition above mentioned, a project by the Empathy Museum, devised in London by Clare Patey, brings 30 stories of Montrealers from different cultural and social backgrounds.: <https://memmtl.ca/en/programming/a-mile-in-my-shoes>

7 As stated on their website. To learn more, please refer to the museum's official webpage:

<https://www.musee-mccord-stewart.ca/>

8 As stated on their website. To learn more, please refer to the museum's official webpage:

<https://memmtl.ca/>



## City Identities – plural narratives

### Building an Urban-Based Collection: The Case of Cheonggyecheon Museum, a Branch of the Seoul Museum of History

Park Hyounmin

#### Biography

Park Hyounmin holds a master's degree in Korean art history from Ewha Womans University and has been a curator at the Seoul Museum of History since 2005. She is currently the Head of the Research and Survey Division, specializing in urban heritage preservation. She curated multiple exhibitions at the Cheonggyecheon Museum and has worked extensively on the conservation of Seoul's tangible and intangible heritage. Her notable publications include *Seoul Map* (2006) and *Joseon White Porcelain* (2008).

#### Introduction

Seoul is a rapidly evolving metropolis where modernization continuously reshapes its landscape. However, beneath this transformation lie deep historical layers. Due to this ongoing urban development, the Seoul Metropolitan Government mandates cultural heritage surveys before any construction projects begin. If significant heritage elements are discovered, excavation efforts take precedence, halting construction until the artifacts are properly studied and preserved. The Seoul Museum of History plays a crucial role in these efforts, ensuring that urban heritage is thoroughly documented and protected before redevelopment proceeds.

Among its most ambitious urban renewal projects is the restoration of Cheonggyecheon Stream. The stream, which once served as a vital waterway, underwent modernization, covering, and later a large-scale restoration. This paper explores the urban collection efforts of the Cheonggyecheon Museum, demonstrating how urban history is preserved, documented, and presented through museum practices, with a focus on both physical artifacts and intangible cultural heritage.



The transformation of Cheonggyecheon from a communal laundry space (Joseon Dynasty) to an expressway (1970s).  
Collection of the Seoul Museum of History.

### The History and Transformation of Cheonggyecheon

Cheonggyecheon Stream has been central to Seoul's urban development (See figure 1). During the Joseon period (1392-1910), it was an essential waterway, but colonial and post-war urbanization led to its coverage, turning it into a highway in the 1970s. The restoration project in the early 2000s reinstated the stream as a cultural and ecological landmark, garnering both praise and criticism. While the project revitalized an urban space, it also displaced communities and erased certain historical traces. The Cheonggyecheon Museum, established in 2005, documents these transformations to ensure that the historical and social fabric of the stream is not lost.

### Seoul Museum of History's Collection Strategies for Urban Heritage

The Seoul Museum of History's approach to collecting urban heritage extends beyond traditional museum practices, incorporating a broad range of tangible and intangible elements. The Cheonggyecheon Museum, as a branch, follows these key strategies:

#### 1. Archaeological Excavation and Documentation

The museum actively excavates sites along the stream, uncovering historical artifacts, architectural remains, and tools used in daily life. These findings are preserved and contextualized within exhibitions.

#### 2. Archival and Historical Records

Historical maps, urban planning documents, and development records provide insight into how Cheonggyecheon has changed over centuries. Government records, media reports, and environmental assessments from the restoration project are essential sources.

#### 3. Oral Histories and Community Narratives

Recognizing the importance of intangible heritage, the museum conducts interviews with former residents, shop owners, and industrial workers who lived and worked near the stream. These narratives capture social and cultural changes that physical artifacts alone cannot convey.

#### 4. Industrial and Commercial Heritage

Cheonggyecheon was historically a hub for small-scale industries and commercial activity. The museum collects shop signs, manufacturing tools, and trade-related documents to illustrate the economic history of the area.

#### 5. Continuous Collection and Research

Unlike conventional museums that passively house static exhibits, the Cheonggyecheon Museum continuously collects artifacts and historical data from the surrounding area. This dynamic process allows the museum to integrate recent discoveries into its exhibitions and educational programs, reinforcing its role as a living archive of Seoul's urban transformation.

### Exhibitions and Public Programs

The museum curates thematic exhibitions that bring urban history to life. Notable exhibitions include: To convey the history of the city in a more engaging and accessible manner, the museum curates thematic exhibitions categorized into three major themes: “History,” “Topography: Waterways,” and “Local Lifestyles.” Representative exhibitions include the following:

Juncheon (준천, 準川) – Showcasing Cheonggyecheon's role in Joseon-era drainage management, featuring excavated artifacts and historical illustrations of the king's procession crossing the stream. A significant highlight is the connection between recovered iron gate relics from Cheonggyecheon's excavation and their depiction in historical paintings, which provide invaluable insights into the stream's historical infrastructure. Juncheon refers to a managed or regulated waterway, emphasizing the historical efforts to control and maintain the flow of the stream. During the Joseon Dynasty, the king would issue direct orders to oversee the cleaning and maintenance of Cheonggyecheon, ensuring the proper management of the city's main waterway.<sup>1</sup> (See figure 2)



Figure 2: An iron gate excavated from Cheonggyecheon (left) and its depiction in a historical painting from the Juncheon exhibition poster (right). Collection of the Seoul Museum of History.

Baekundongcheon (백운동천) – This exhibition explores the tributary streams of Cheonggyecheon, based on research conducted over multiple years. It showcases the transformation of riverside communities and the evolving lifestyles of residents along the stream, illustrating how the environment shaped daily life through different eras.<sup>2</sup>

Made in Cheonggyecheon: Media Art × Sewoon Arcade – This exhibition series focuses on the evolving character of Cheonggyecheon’s surrounding communities from the Joseon era to modern times. It examines how the area transitioned from a settlement of traditional Seoul natives to a hub for new migrants, who played a significant role in shaping its commercial landscape. The exhibition highlights the construction of Sewoon Arcade, Seoul’s first mixed-use residential-commercial complex built in the late 1960s, and how its secondhand electronics market flourished. Notably, it features a story about how world-renowned video artist Nam June Paik sourced broken televisions from the market, incorporating them into his pioneering video art. This exhibition series demonstrates how Cheonggyecheon has continuously adapted to social and technological changes.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the museum organizes public programs such as guided tours, educational workshops, and participatory oral history projects, ensuring that citizens engage directly with Seoul’s urban heritage.

### Conclusion and Future Directions

The Cheonggyecheon Museum and the Seoul Museum of History play a crucial role in documenting and interpreting urban history in a rapidly changing metropolis. The excavation projects, oral history research, exhibitions, and museum education programs initiated by the Cheonggyecheon Museum have set a precedent for urban history museums globally. Many other cities pursuing urban regeneration projects now look to Cheonggyecheon as a model for integrating museum functions into city planning.

Looking ahead, the museum can enhance its role in urban heritage preservation through several initiatives:

1. Expanding Digital Archives: Developing interactive online exhibits and digitizing oral histories to increase accessibility.
2. Strengthening Community Collaboration: Engaging former residents, industry experts, and local organizations in storytelling and archival projects.
3. Enhancing Public Participation: Broadening educational programs, participatory exhibitions, and workshops to foster a deeper connection between the public and urban history.
4. Balancing Heritage and Development: Continuing research on unpreserved sections of Cheonggyecheon and advocating for the historical recognition of evolving urban spaces.

By integrating historical narratives into contemporary urban development, the Cheonggyecheon Museum provides a sustainable model for urban heritage preservation worldwide.

### Notes

- 1 The exhibition, titled *Juncheon: Connecting Yeongjo and Baekseong*<sup>1</sup>, was held at the Cheonggyecheon Museum from August 26 to November 5, 2017: *Juncheon: Connecting Yeongjo and Baekseong* was a special exhibition at the Cheonggyecheon Museum that explored the symbolic and functional roles of water management under King Yeongjo, emphasizing the link between royal authority and civic life.
- 2 The exhibition, titled *Baekundongcheon*<sup>2</sup>, was held at the Cheonggyecheon Museum from December 15, 2017 to March 25, 2018.: *Baekundongcheon* was a special exhibition that explored the social and spatial transformations of the tributary streams of Cheonggyecheon, focusing on the interplay between water, environment, and everyday life in riverside communities.
- 3 The exhibition, titled *Media Art × Sewoon Arcade*<sup>3</sup>, was held at the Cheonggyecheon Museum from December 10, 2020 to May 9, 2021: *Media Art × Sewoon Arcade* was a special exhibition that explored the evolving identity of the Cheonggyecheon area, focusing on urban transition, secondhand technology culture, and media art practices in and around Sewoon Arcade.

## City Identities – plural narratives

### Collecting with(in) Cairo: Towards Enhancing the Living Heritage of the Coffeehouses

Manar Mazhar Ashour Hassan

#### Biography

Manar is a Learning specialist at the Grand Egyptian Museum. She holds a double MA in museum studies from the Universities of Würzburg and Helwan. She has participated in various museography projects in Egypt, Germany, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. In her thesis project, she worked on the first assumption of a city museum in Egypt. In 2022 she started her educational content on social media to raise awareness about Heritage and Museums.

Like all global mega-cities, the city of Cairo is known for its rich diversity of living heritage, full of life, sketching a vibrant cultural scene that adds value to places, streets, walls and more. The people of Cairo have unique memories of the city; they connect to Cairo's coffeehouses, which are regarded as places of social life and entertainment.

In Cairo, rethinking what museums collect and how they collect, means moving beyond physical objects to capture the city's sounds, rhythms, stories, and people. Revising and changing the collecting and displaying practices is to explore how historical collections can inspire new insights and question how to care for contemporary narratives. Cairo Museums are re-displaying their collections to include stories and experiences through participatory projects with local communities of the city. In this empirical study, interviews with café owners, regular café visitors, and historians who wrote their works of literature in cafés contribute to understanding beyond the place and objects of Cairo Coffeehouses.

In Cairo, coffeehouses are believed to have originated in the 16th century, shortly after coffee was introduced to the region. The traditional *Qahwa* (Coffee) culture appeared during the Ottoman era (when Egypt became part of the Ottoman Empire), with a unique story of place and a culture that lives until modern times, 'Specialty Coffee Shops.'



A photo in 1997 at El Fishawi Historic Café in Cairo featuring the author and her family gathering and enjoying a day while making memories at the coffeehouse

Built on the ruins of historic buildings, the coffeehouses of Cairo witnessed the city's social and political history. The function of coffeehouses as gathering places for intellectuals, artists, and revolutionaries, has always shaped and influenced various historical events. In the early years of the twentieth century, coffeehouses were the public's favourite places. Doubtless, Cairo's daily life has always included time inside coffeehouses, whether in the early mornings to get the first sip of the day or during the day to spill the tea. Among Cairo's famous historic cafés, those with a role in shaping public discourse are: Café Riche, Matatia Café, Al-Anglo Café, Al-Horeya Café, El-Lewaa Café, Fishawi and Groppi. (See figure 1)



Figure 2: A photo taken by the author from the temporary exhibition 'Intangible Cultural Heritage – A Bridge for Dialogue Among Cultures' featuring photographs and artifacts at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, celebrating the rich tapestry of ICH in Egypt through a unique dialogue.

When considering what represents the living heritage of the city, coffeehouses stand out in particular. The cultural values of coffeehouses as intangible heritage are crucial when Cairo museum professionals consider creating a city museum dedicated to Cairo.<sup>1</sup> Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage spotlights the "Cultural Narratives of Cafes", which are essential to exploring the coffeehouses of Cairo as informal museums of urban culture, memory, and storytelling. The approach of "collecting with(in) the city" in the context of non-traditional cultural spaces, classified into two versions, the traditional and the modern, is a coin bearing two faces of contemporary life for people who consider coffeehouses as their living tradition. Doubtless, the traditional coffeehouse includes tangible and intangible elements that act as repositories of collective memory for people, through their architecture, objects, furniture, sounds, and stories. (See figure 3)



Figure 3: A photo of some objects linked to the traditional coffeehouses in Cairo. Credits: Karim El Hayawan

### The rise of contemporary cafés has no real impact on the existence of traditional ones, as both serve as social spaces and gathering hubs.

First, let's highlight the difference between the two kinds of cafés, the traditional one, also known as 'El Ahwa El Balady' is a community-centered, no-frills café where people—mostly men and less women—gather to socialize, drink tea or Turkish coffee, and play games like backgammon or dominoes. It reflects a deep-rooted cultural tradition and offers a casual, familiar space at low prices. Unlike the contemporary cafés, or the 'Specialty cafés', they focus on high-quality beans, modern brewing methods, and stylish, comfortable interiors designed for working, relaxing, or meeting friends. They cater to a younger, mixed-gender urban crowd and reflect global coffee trends with higher prices and curated experiences. Newer generations are increasingly drawn to discovering hidden gems like historic coffeehouses, which not only help preserve heritage but also align with evolving social media trends. In turn, these trends play a beneficial role in enhancing tourism in Cairo by promoting its rich café culture.

In conclusion, the future of coffeehouses as sites of collecting and cultural engagement face potential challenges due to gentrification, urban development, and their existence in museum displays. The cultural narratives of cafés play a vital role in preserving Cairo's coffeehouse heritage, as they bear memories of people who lived and who are still living, human interactions, and the daily life stories of the people. Museums and cultural institutions in the city have opportunities to collaborate with artists and emerging community initiatives to rethink the representation of coffeehouses as public spaces of living heritage. Digital Archiving of stories weaved from the cultural narratives of cafés is essential to safeguarding the oral history of Cairo for future generations.

### Notes

- 1 Cairo doesn't have a city museum yet, only the author of this article created the first assumption in her MA thesis.

ISBN 978-2-487970-26-7

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