

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S DAY, 2016 DECLARATION

We are gathered here at the American Museum of Natural History to issue three demands:

RESPECT – New York's premier scientific museum continues to honor the bogus racial classification that assigned colonized peoples to the domain of Nature here, and Europeans to the realm of Culture, across the park in the Met. We demand that the museum's display arrangements and classifications be reconceived by curatorial representatives of the "exhibited" populations, and that human remains, sacred things, and objects of power stolen from Indigenous peoples should be returned.

REMOVE – The equestrian status of Theodore Roosevelt outside the American Museum of Natural History is a stark embodiment of the white supremacy that Roosevelt espoused and promoted. It is an affront to all who pass it on entering the museum, but especially to African and Native Americans. A monument that appears to glorify racial hierarchies should be retired from public view. We demand that City Council members vote to remove this monument to racial conquest.

RENAME – It's time for the Mayor and City Council to rename Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples' Day. New York City sits on the territory of the Lenape, and over one hundred thousand Indigenous people live on this territory today. We demand that this holiday be relaunched as an occasion to dignify our Indigenous brothers and sisters, and it should no longer commemorate a figure widely associated with exploitation and enslavement.

— **DECOLONIZE THIS MUSEUM | DECOLONIZE THIS STATUE | DECOLONIZE THIS DAY** —

[#decolonizethisplace](#)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING (available for download at [decolonizethisplace.org](#))

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ANTI-COLUMBUS DAY TOUR

DECOLONIZE THIS MUSEUM



*rename the day
remove the statue
respect the ancestors
we heal*

"Public Enemy" Remix

WE ARE HERE, in this museum, with our friends, families and communities. We begin by acknowledging that we are standing on occupied Lenape land. Although it is labelled as a Natural History museum, it includes displays of Indigenous and other colonized peoples.

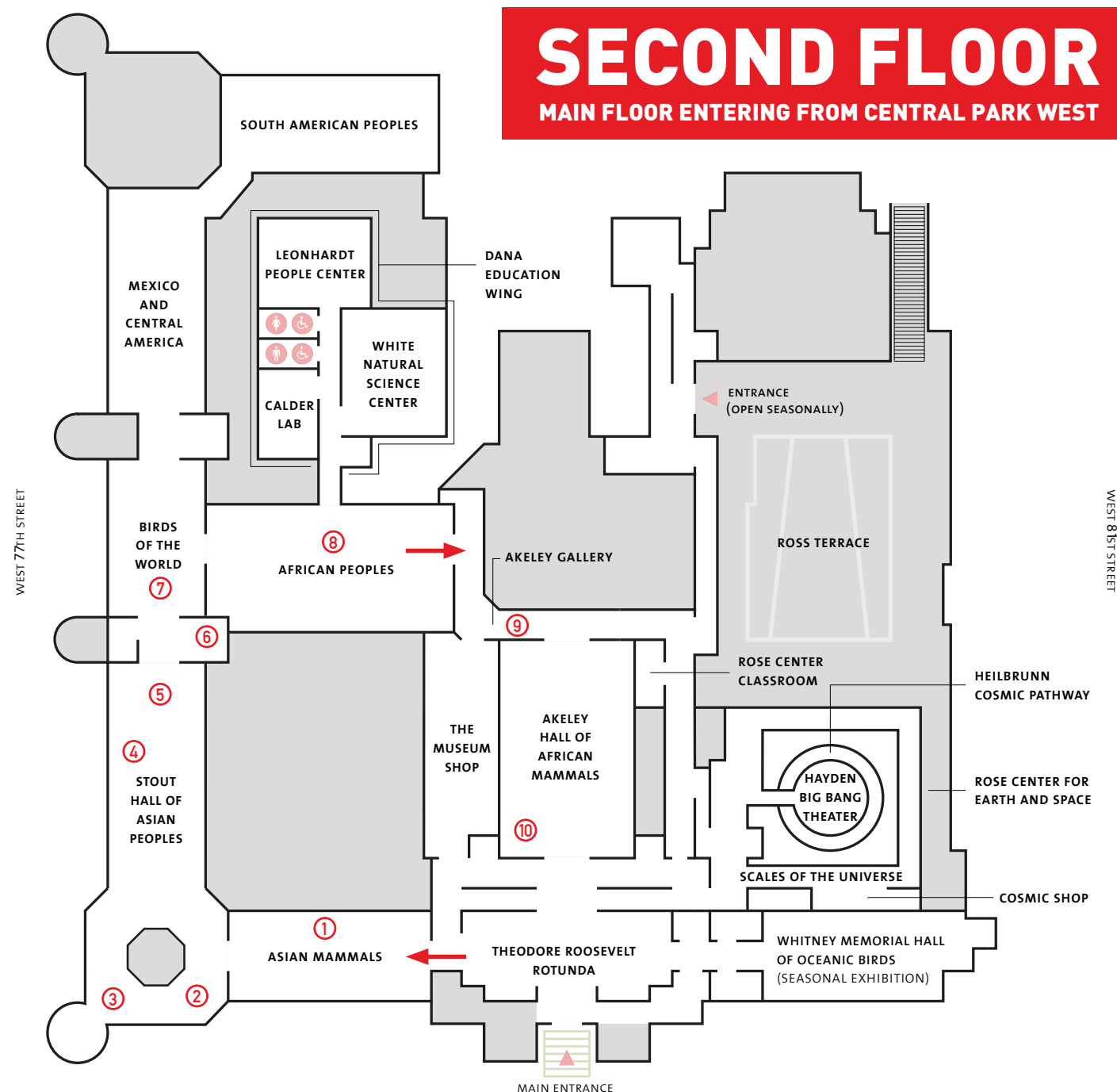
Though its exhibits change from year to year, this museum is frozen in time, bound by nineteenth-century racial classifications that designated human populations as “primitive” or “civilized.” Generations of curators have continued this racist legacy, and millions of visitors are invited to take them for granted.

We are here to amplify the tradition of resistance to this way of depicting history, and to respect the Indigenous artifacts and ancestral presence that have been collected, through acts of violent appropriation, and gathered, under this roof. We are here to protest this monument of white supremacy on a day that should be renamed. And we are here to demand the removal of the Teddy Roosevelt statue that stands outside the museum.

This is an alternative tour of the exhibits on the Second Floor. It is only a sample of how deeply flawed the museum continues to be.

SECOND FLOOR

MAIN FLOOR ENTERING FROM CENTRAL PARK WEST



1 HALL OF ASIAN MAMMALS

Shot down, stuffed, and hauled to the museum for display, these species made their way here through the circuits of empire. As these animals were collected, the fields, forests, and waters which they shared with Adivasis (the indigenous of the land) were typically seized by colonial authorities, and the human residents were displaced and dispossessed. This process continues today with the creation of “wildlife preserves,” depopulated for the use of tourists, just as the tradition of Indigenous resistance continues.

2 MAN’S RISE TO CIVILIZATION

The central pillar of this hall tells us that civilization was achieved 5,000 years ago with the invention of writing, science, and law. In the case on the right, Koryak and Chuckee peoples are placed historically in the Pleistocene – which ended more than 11,000 years ago. Yet these peoples, who are being exhibited as examples of a long-extinct primitive phase of humanity, are actually living on the land today. Why are they stranded in prehistory? Upstairs on the third floor, Eastern Woodlands and Plains Indians as well as Pacific Peoples are likewise exhibited as if they have no history of their own.

3 JEWS OF ASIA

This display, which references the continuity of “Israel,” recounts Asian Jewish diasporic history as a way of normalizing the the Israeli state’s claims to “ancestral lands.” For example, it uses the historical customs of the Bukharan Jews to legitimize the Israeli state’s policy of the Jewish “right of return.” We ask why this exhibit has been modelled this way when the Palestinian right of return to ethnically cleansed villages is not only denied by the occupying forces but also erased from U.S. public opinion by Zionist voices and powerful institutions like this museum.

4 MAHATMA GANDHI

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is heroized here as the man who brought India into “modernity.” Gandhi was one of the leaders of India’s independence struggle, but he also upheld the profoundly unequal caste system--a hierarchy that continues to oppress, and be protested by, the Dalit movement. Often cited as an inspiration for civil rights advocates, Gandhi’s legacy of racist attitudes towards African peoples has been successfully protested by faculty and students at the University of Ghana, resulting in the recent removal of his statue in the capital of Accra.

5 HALL OF ISLAM

This hall presents an extreme exoticizing of Islam as seen through Western eyes. This perspective is characterized by a particular obsession with the “women of Islam” who, in many Westerners’ minds, can never be free. Why try to compartmentalize an entire religious culture into a singular box? This is how the “other” is constructed. This simplification is what allows Islamophobia to thrive - the same belief system that justifies drone strikes and the “War on Terror.” Lastly, where is the Hall of Christendom?

MIDEWIWIN DISPLAY (3rd floor, action in progress)

There is a cloistered nook in the Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians where sacred beings of the Midewiwin tradition have been hanging naked for over 50 years. The otter pouches and medicine beings in those cases are awake, aware, and they are tired. Anishinaabe women are drumming to feed the ancestors and decolonize the space through sound.

6 HENRY FAIRFIELD OSBORN

Henry Fairfield Osborn – paleontologist, eugenicist, and museum president from 1908-1933 – oversaw the installation of the first dioramas. The words on his bust celebrate him as a godlike reanimator of the past: “For him the dry bones came to life and giant forms of ages past rejoined the pageant of the living.” But these are bones pulled from colonized land, and they are witness to histories older and deeper than Osborn. His beliefs in the racial superiority of Nordic peoples shaped the arrangement of the museum’s collections, and they have not been substantially altered over the last century.

7 BIRDS OF THE WORLD

The “conservation” of North American birds was pioneered by taxidermist John James Audubon, who shot as many of the same species as possible in order to construct life models for his life studies. He often painted while the bird was in its death throes to capture the most vivid plumage colors. These mass killings in the service of capturing rare species for posterity set the tone for the collecting practices at natural history museums like this one, and stimulated the barbaric trade in fashion for feathers and animal skins. Today, birds like the King Penguin are on the frontline of extinction from climate change – a side-effect of the consumer economy of killing and display.

8 HALL OF AFRICAN PEOPLES

Here, the vast multiplicity of African social and cultural life is thinned out and labelled like flora and fauna. Africans are depicted as pre-modern, bearing curious instruments and colorful costumes, instead of as present-day people. Discrimination against African diasporic peoples is everywhere reinforced by these primitivist stereotypes. The Black liberation tradition has fought long and hard against their legacy. Most recently, and in a very militant fashion, the Black Lives Matter movement has confronted the state forces that bring down racist violence on black and brown communities. Lastly, why is there no Hall of European Peoples?

9 COUNTDOWN TO ZERO: DEFEATING DISEASE

This exhibit celebrates the eradication of smallpox, and the hope that guinea worm disease and polio may be cured soon. In the early twentieth century, eugenicists who met regularly at the museum were preoccupied with “inherited diseases.” They popularized the belief that Indigenous, African American, and many immigrant population groups were genetically “defective,” or “feeble-minded,” and therefore not eligible for full American citizenship. They argued for sterilization programs and ultimately for closing the immigration door, which swung shut in 1924. The International Eugenics Congress was still meeting here in 1932.

10 CARL AKELEY HALL OF AFRICAN MAMMALS

As they forcibly extracted resources from African peoples, so-called naturalists and explorers like Carl Akeley collected a variety of animals across the continent. Their activities led to species’ endangerment, the flourishing of the fur and ivory trade, and widespread deforestation. Akeley was a hunting companion of Teddy Roosevelt and intimate of Belgian King Albert I, who succeeded King Leopold II as the arch-colonizer of the Congo. If you roll up this flyer and put it to your eye, you are looking down the scope of Carl Akeley’s gun. Each of the dioramas you have visited is a snapshot of domination: remember this when you look through the glass to see a human on display.

* Museum admission is by donation – if you are getting your own ticket, pay as little or as much as you would like *

* The tour begins in the Hall of Asian Mammals – once you have your ticket, wait for the guides there *

* After the tour, we will gather on the front steps by the statue of Theodore Roosevelt for a speak-out at 5:15pm *

Please add your own comments to the map, take a photo, and tag it with #decolonizethisplace

RESPECT, REMOVE, RENAME.