

Art History: Should the West return cultural artefacts to their former colonial territories?

History is a study of the past, it's indiscriminate. A look through any chronology of events creates a marker open to criticism, evaluation and interpretation. Cultural artefacts are those items pertaining to give cultural insights about its creators and users.

In 2018, a restitution report commissioned by Emmanuel Macron called for the return of thousands of African artworks that are currently housed in French museums. The report argued that holding such artefacts deprived people of "the spiritual nourishment that is the foundation of [their] humanity"<sup>1</sup>. The repatriation of colonial objects in Western museums has often been in discussion but the recent Black Lives Matter movement has re-ignited the debate. While recurrent demand for their return has been displayed by former colonial territories, some argue that the artefacts are best left in their current positions where they are conserved appropriately, accessible and can be relatively well protected in the environments of major European cities

The repatriation of cultural artefacts to their country of origin is often viewed as the right thing to do as artefacts are enriched when viewed in their place of origin. As an example, the Elgin marbles originally formed part of the Parthenon in Athens but currently reside in the British museum. It is only on seeing the marbles in Athens that we can appreciate the intended impact of the marbles against the backdrop of the Acropolis. In the British museum, they appear fragmented as they have no sense of geographical or cultural belonging and are stripped of their historical context. The artefacts are a symbolic link between modern and ancient Athens so represent the cultural identity of many and to keep

---

<sup>1</sup> F. Sarr and B. Savoy (2018) *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, p.8.

the artefacts away from its original location is to diminish their value as cultural and historical objects. Additionally, by preserving them in museums, the artefacts may not fulfil their intended purpose. For example, if African human remains were to be returned, they may be buried according to local traditions. Similarly, the Geez manuscripts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church are sacred, religious objects that shouldn't be displayed as relics. They could be replicated and quoted in textbooks in traditional schools in Ethiopia, this can occur locally within a knowledgeable setting or remotely via input from local historians, the most important aspect is the creation of relevant knowledge.

However, some challenge the idea of restitution as they argue it would not be helpful.

Tiffany Jenkins has argued that the repatriation of artefacts may lead a politicisation of culture. She believes that objects acquired by the West are best kept where they are:

“Ancient objects sometimes belong in museums, often far away from their creation and discovery, where they can be cared for, studied, and shown to the world”.<sup>2</sup>

Fifth century BC Athens is unrecognisable compared to modern Greece. Thus, the decision of where artefacts should be placed should not be diminished to trying to achieve

impossible historical authenticity but should be dependent on where is best for the object.

This leaves a big question of what criteria could be used to calculate the best setting. All

artefacts are made with certain intents and purposes, but regardless of this purpose, the

object will inevitably pass from the creator, into the hands of someone else. This makes us

question who, if anyone, should artefacts be repatriated to. There have calls for the Koh-I-

Noor diamond to be returned to India. However, the diamond has changed hands many

---

<sup>2</sup> T. Jenkins (2016) *Keeping their marbles: How the treasures of the past ended up in museums- and why they should stay there*, p.123.

times so it is hard to determine who has the best claim and thus where the diamond should be repatriated to, after all, although most people believe that it should be returned to Punjab, Ranjit Singh stole it from the Mughals just as the British stole it from Duleep Singh, the next chain in this link is the museum, which itself then becomes part of the artefacts. This question of ownership then creates just as many questions as answers. Should these objects be returned to a particular country, or should they be released directly to the culture that it relates to? What if borders or political control has changed, making the value of the artefacts less important to the incoming regime. We have to consider what may be illegal now, may have been culturally correct and the accepted norm at a particular point in time, how do we override that derivative?

In some instances, whilst objects may have been taken via colonialism, some may point to the infrastructure and educational benefits that colonialism has given to these communities, which have vastly improved the lives of the community, much of which goes unvalued. Is this the price of that improvement?

One argument that is frequently raised is the cost of ownership, through managing the artefacts. Some fragile items, need carefully managed environments, whether this be via temperature, security or atmospheric measures such as dust, humidity and pollution. In certain political environments, it would be unfair to place this burden on a state without the effective and economic ability to safeguard them.

That's not to say the west is perfect, for example, a private collection in Paris mistook a Dogon for a Bambara artefact. Likewise, in the late 1930s, the British museums attempted to make the Parthenon marbles look whiter but removed much of the finer details of the

pieces. Since the West cannot always identify with these objects, the lack of care has led to the destruction and misinterpretation of multiple artefacts.

We must also consider, by restoring artefacts, countries may experience increased tourism rates as people go to visit the objects. Cultural and historical tourism is an important source of income for many countries. If their artefacts are held in western museums, they are denied the economic opportunity to build up their touristic trade.

Many would also be concerned about the political instability of some former colonial nations, if there is any risk that artefacts may be destroyed, or sold in corrupt states, then these objects must be retained safely. What then becomes problematic is the criteria and application of how a country or organisation decides which countries are able to receive artefacts and which for reason of security cannot. This discrimination is itself a reminder of the colonial power base.

Does the retention of these artefacts, serve as a reminder of former oppression? Is that oppression history? Don't we need to learn from these historical facts?

It is easy to do this at the moment as collections can be viewed together which gives visitors a unique insight into the relationships that colonies had with each other. Returning objects would usually entail breaking up collections meaning the perspective currently available to us would no longer exist which may diminish the power and meaning of the artefacts.

There are even logistical problems with returning cultural artefacts. Even with modern technology, transporting objects of high value across the world could be a huge, impractical, expensive task with the risks of damage and theft being high. The Victoria and Albert Museum along with others have granted long term loans of their artefacts such as the

valuables taken during the Battle of Maqdala from Ethiopia, these objects are typically small so easier to transport. Globally we are more than able to transport goods via sea, air or road efficiently and economically. The real threat is security and the fragile nature of some objects.

On balance, whether or not cultural artefacts should be returned to their former colonial territories should be determined on a case-by-case basis. If the artefact was stolen then the case for demanding it back holds more weight. Where some communities have almost no access to their historical and cultural heritage, there is a strong case for them demanding the return of their works from the West. However, this decision cannot just be based on where the objects belong but where they will have a more profound and significant cultural and social benefit. We need to consider accessibility, it's better to have artefacts that are accessible to all, than those that become side-lined in an obscure region which neglects their being. If a particular object was stored in a local region, would it get the same global recognition it deserves? Museums provide the framework, of a safe, environment, with knowledge and experience on tap to best illustrate the importance of any item on a global stage, for everyone's benefit.

In a global environment, its most important that objects are preserved and made accessible for everyone's education. Knowledge and learning are to everyone's benefit and the journey of any object is its very history, to ignore that journey is to undermine its very existence.

We are all part of the same world and seek enrichment from all the historic cultures that have been before us. Let's think globally and the for the betterment of the artefact, regardless of location.