

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

To open with a quote from Geoffrey Robertson QC¹ (The Guardian, 2019), 'The trustees of the British Museum have become the world's largest receivers of stolen property'. This speaks volumes about one side of this interesting argument regarding the repatriation of cultural artefacts.

This quote acknowledges the role museums have as repositories of many cultural artefacts, originating both from the museums' home country, and countries elsewhere. One question that arises is the purpose of a museum in the western world. Museums are educational institutions; however, it is often debated whether they aim to teach history of a given subject, in relation to all human learning, or to teach the history from a local or national perspective. The British Museum advocates that they aim to elevate and advance the understanding of human history by exceeding cultural boundaries. Some argue that these 'encyclopaedic museums' hold artefacts that do not specifically belong to any culture, and only act as a vessel to educate the most people. (Debating Matters, 2018)

To argue the case that cultural artefacts should be repatriated, we need look no further than the Greek Parthenon Marbles (Elgin Marbles). Although Greece was never a colonial territory of Britain, the marbles are a collection of classical Greek sculptures, currently held in the British Museum, London, along with countless other valuable historical pieces originating from Greece. Amal Clooney² currently leads the charge in support of their return to Athens. Due to the celebrity publicity surrounding the Elgin Marbles, more cultural disputes along a similar vein have surfaced. The Greek statues stand as a symbol for their own cultural origins, and if taken out of context, it is argued that they do not have the same effect or impact when experienced, as they might in their original framework. However, the British Museum defends their notion that the sculptures should be

¹ Geoffrey Robertson is an academic, human rights barrister, author and broadcaster. He is a founder of the Doughty Street Chambers law firm and has argued a large number of landmark cases seen in the media.

² Amal Clooney, wife of George Clooney, is a British Barrister who specialises in international law and human rights.

appreciated in the wider context of their history in relation to other artefacts also held by the museum (Forbes, 2014).

Western museums collate and display only a miniscule proportion of the artefacts that they own and hold. If these artefacts were to be returned to their places of origin, many more of them would be able to be on display around the world. For example, the British Museum usually has about 80,000 artefacts on display at one time. This may seem like a large amount; however, it is only 1% of the objects and documents in their possession (The British Museum, 2019), and there is no way that it could all be displayed unless distributed around the globe.

Not to mention, The British Museum is notorious for loaning their exhibitions to their countries of origin for a specific length of time, then taking them back. Felwine Farr³, made a public statement saying that this is unacceptable and 'not a satisfactory solution' on the basis that in essence, the artefacts have been stolen. France itself is a great example of this, there have been thousands of African art pieces and artefacts held in French Museums for centuries. Emmanuel Macron (President of France) acknowledged the historical explanations for their being there, however he followed up with the claim that it is unacceptable for France to hold large parts of Africa's cultural heritage. As a result of this long debate, the French National Assembly and senate voted in favour of repatriation of some of their African Artworks, starting with the Treasures of Behanzin, that resided at the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum, Paris, along with 70,000 other African artefacts (The Week, 2020). This has sparked discussion among other western museums that hold artefacts from their own former colonial territories as to whether they should consider returning their 'stolen goods'.

Those advocating for the repatriation of cultural artefacts argue that by doing this, the colonial history between nations such as the United Kingdom and their former territories can be acknowledged and accepted as a part of history and can then be 'moved past' as it were, to build more diplomatic relationships between nations (US News, 2012). For many, the 'ownership' of

³ A co-author of the The report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage
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colonial artefacts by their former powers, classes them as stolen items. From the point of view of the former territories, having their property remain in the 'mother country' is only a dark reminder of past imperialistic culture, and continues to allow the colonial power to benefit from their historical wrongs. The vast majority of the artefacts in question were crafted on the back of the slave trade. If the pieces are to remain with the western powers, does this give them a somewhat corrupted legacy? And is it justifiable to say that they should be kept on the grounds of education if these former powers continue to profit from their colonial pasts?

In contrast, there is scope for complications regarding foreign relations if the ownership of the artefacts in question is disputed. A large portion of cultural artefacts have intricate and somewhat multifaceted histories, that may be unknown or cryptic. This could cause conflict between nations that want possession of such pieces.

Those defending the retention of cultural artefacts contend that the works have enough history in themselves that they need not have their original context if their current context would educate more people. James Cuno⁴ takes on a utilitarian argument stemming from the idea that artefacts kept in their current western museum situations, can give the most insight, to the most people. He claims that cultural work must be celebrated in relation to other artefacts from elsewhere, 'encouraging curiosity' surrounding cultural diversity. He even went as far as to say that the Elgin Marbles are 'as much British as they are Greek'. Some would argue this to be true, as the Marbles' placement in London exposes them to a much larger audience than they would receive if repatriated back to Athens. The marbles are considered to contribute greatly to the general understanding of humanity's artistic and historical legacy in the context of other cultural works. Their place in Britain has given many people insight into this and has not deprived Greece of its own cultural heritage because Greece still has most of its own original artefacts and works.

⁴ American historian and art curator (currently president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust)
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Additionally, the argument *for* repatriation has been questioned over its connotations with ethnic identity politics. Does the repatriation argument assume that those of a certain ethnicity from the artefact's country of origin should have a distinct or exceptional feeling towards the work, and that others should not? This presents the assertion that objects belong to certain groups, which could begin to enter the realm of destructive identity politics, subsequently opening further disputes on topics such as the line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. Therefore, it makes sense for the former western mother countries to retain the artefacts, to avoid further discord.

There are strong and robust arguments for both the retention and repatriation of cultural artefacts from their current western locations to their former territories. Those supporting the repatriation believe that the context of a work plays a large role on the impact it has on a viewer, stating that a piece must be experienced in its original framework to be experienced to its full extent. However, the retention argument contrasts this with the idea that historical pieces should be learned about in the presence of their cross-cultural counterparts from similar eras, to gain a rounded impression of their full historical backgrounds. The repatriation discussion alludes to the polluted legacy left by imperialism, and how the mother countries still hang on to and benefit from their imperial status. It is argued that this will continue for as long as the artefacts remain in their current placements. A significantly larger proportion of artefacts could be displayed if repatriation occurs, rather than a measly 1%. On the other hand, the utilitarian backed case debates that having cultural works remain in western countries will benefit more people in terms of accessibility and education, and that repatriation could build further grounds for conflict between nations and their former powers regarding cultural and ethnic identity politics. There will always be a debate regarding the repatriation of cultural artefacts from western countries to their former colonial territories, and it is up to the nations in question as to whether or not this takes place. From the evidence and arguments illustrated above some would conclude that repatriation should be a long term aim for former colonial powers. Fundamentally, to build international diplomacy and reinstate the works into their original contexts.

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