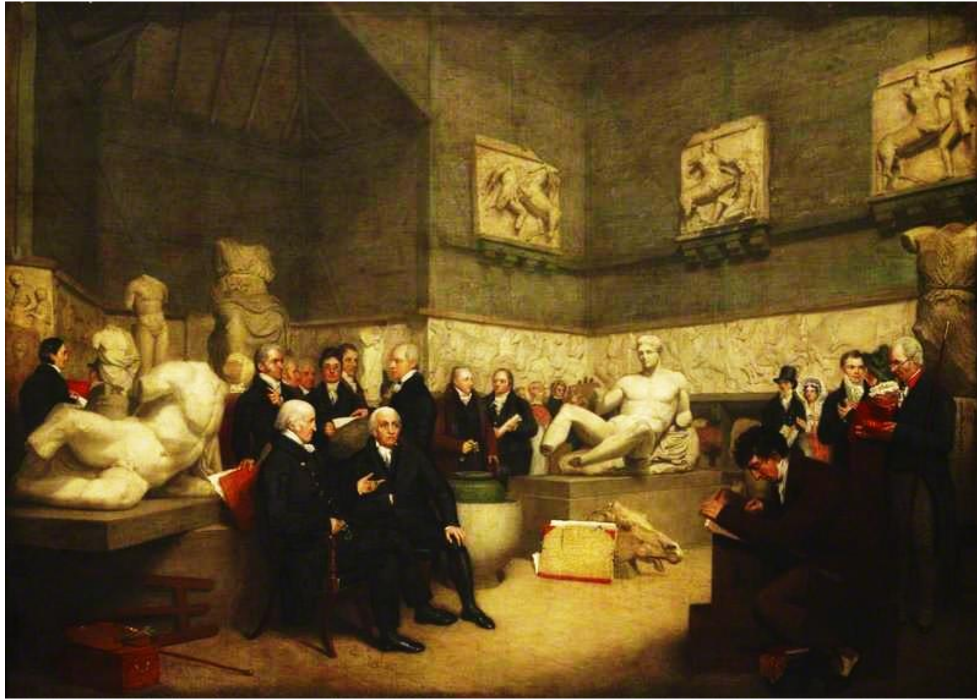
Do Historical Objects Belong in their Country of Origin?

Four historians consider one of the most contentious questions facing the West's museums and galleries.

Published in *History Today, Volume 69, Issue 3,* March 2019



A portrait depicting the Elgin Marbles in a temporary Elgin Room at the British Museum surrounded by museum staff, a trustee and visitors, 1819

Artefacts do not need to be 'returned'

Tiffany Jenkins, author of Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums – and Why They Should Stay There *(Oxford, 2016)*

When, 3,000 years ago, sculptors in the Assyrian Empire chiselled into being winged, human-headed bulls for King Ashurnasirpal II, they could not have dreamt that their creations would end up centuries later in museums thousands of miles away. The five-legged, alabaster beasts were not made for brightly-lit galleries. Even if we wanted to, it would not be possible to return them to their place of origin.

The ancient Assyria of 883 BC is very different from modern northern Iraq; fifth century BC Athens, which produced the much fought-over Parthenon Marbles, is unrecognisable compared to modern Greece. The court of Benin, which commissioned the Benin Bronzes, hardly resembles contemporary Nigeria. All of the artefacts we gaze upon today were made for someone else and for some other purpose: to celebrate the powerful; for worship; or for ordinary household use. Regardless of intent, soon after any object is made, it passes out of the hands of the creator into those of others – patrons, family, friends, thieves – new owners, crossing continents and centuries and changing use as it does.

Yet it is in the sculpture, tablets and carvings that remain that residue of their origins is found. Artefacts do not need to be 'returned' for this to happen. Like time machines, far away from their original location, ancient artefacts on show in 21st- century London, Tokyo or Senegal can transport the visitor to ancient Assyria, Athens, or the royal palace of Benin. The decision about where to place

ancient artefacts should not be reduced to chasing impossible historical authenticity, contrition for the past (fashionable now), or ethnicity (intermittently popular), but where is best for the object.

A terrifying sculpture, once an object of domination or devotion, becomes in a gallery an object of enlightenment, beauty, or a social text to be read. Next to other artefacts from different times and places it can provoke questions, illustrate relationships and take on an elevated meaning. That is the value of museums.

It is time for museums to do their job

Marie Rodet, Senior Lecturer in the History of Africa, SOAS, University of London

Artefacts taken from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Oceania and the Americas during colonialism belong and should be returned to their countries of origin. Most of the global artefacts that are now held in European museums were either looted or bought for a value far below that of the European art market price at the time of their acquisition.

One argument put forward for keeping these items is that the location of their origin is unknown or ambiguous – it would be impossible to know to whom and where to return them. This is a fallacious argument, which confirms that galleries, museums and private collectors have never made the effort to know the history of the artefacts in their possession; or worse, they know, but don't want to acknowledge, the circumstances under which they were acquired. Those galleries, museums and private collectors were (and are) only interested in their aesthetic value and 'alterity', with the continuous assumption – especially in the case of Africa – that the continent has little 'real' history. I am amazed by the number of mistakes I find in both small and prominent exhibitions of African artefacts in European galleries. A prominent private collection in Paris mistook a Dogon for a Bambara artefact, for example, and there were inaccuracies in the version of the history of West Africa's medieval empires in a recent major exhibition in London.

The history of these artefacts includes their looting and trafficking. Yet recognising this would highlight unethical acquisition practices. This is not specific to artefacts acquired during colonialism; it is a more general problem of the unequal relationships between artists and collectors, brought into stark contrast during the age of colonial plunder. It is time for galleries, museums and collectors to do their job and retrace the exact history of artefacts in their possession and return them as part of a reparation process to those countries that were victims of European colonialism and imperialism.

Those reparations should also include the funding of training programmes to preserve objects in their countries of origin. If the national galleries in Africa, Asia, South America or even, sometimes, Europe, seem ill-prepared it is because, so far, they have not been given the chance to meet the challenges of preservation. Returning the world's artefacts is a good opportunity to strengthen the heritage capacities of those countries looted during colonisation.

Repatriation raises questions that resist sweeping answers

Ioannis D. Stefanidis, Professor of Diplomatic History, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Few artefacts encapsulate the intricacy of this question better than the 'Horses of Saint Mark'. Variously dated to classical Greek or Roman antiquity, these copper statues of four horses found their way to the Hippodrome of Constantinople in the fourth century AD, were looted and shipped to Venice after the sacking of the Byzantine capital by the Crusaders in 1204, removed from St Mark's Basilica and placed on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris by Napoleon in 1797 and, following Waterloo, returned to Venice, where they remain. More recently, one or more of them were displayed in various cities abroad and in Milan, before, in 1982, they were relocated inside St Mark, as a precaution against further damage from air pollution.

The fate of the horses raises a number of issues, common to innumerable cases of claimed cultural property around the world. First, one needs to establish their place of origin: this could be either some part of Greece or, more plausibly, Italy. A case could be made that, irrespective of where their foundry lay, they were intended for display in Constantinople. There for nearly nine centuries they symbolised equestrian prowess. True, they were moved to Venice as spoils of war, but they became an integral part of that city's religious life for another nine centuries. Their forced Parisian sojourn seems to underscore their identification with the lagoon city, whose environment has, however, proved corrosive.

Who, then, is entitled to claim 'repatriation' before the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee? Could the second looters, the French, qualify? Under international law, looting is illegal today and was widely deprecated in 1797, though one might wonder about the difference between Napoleon's pilfering of the horses and the Venetians' misappropriation since 1204. Time offers an easy answer. This would suggest that Constantinople or its modern incarnation, Istanbul, should be considered. Could the Turks claim the horses 'back', on the basis of their connection with an existing monument, the Hippodrome, despite their nine-century long absence and the fact that they are not exactly associated with the Ottoman or Turkish cultural heritage? The repatriation of artefacts removed from their place of origin before such practice was progressively outlawed during the 20th century raises questions that resist sweeping answers.

No issue demands more careful consideration

Nicholas Thomas, Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge

It depends. In the sphere of culture no issue demands more careful, case-by-case, consideration. The question has often been raised of the ethnographic collections that became vast through the ambitious, indeed rapacious, collecting associated with European colonial trade and science in the late 19th century. Those who assume that collections stand as a sort of coda to the imperial enterprise, an appropriate focus for redress and restitution, may however be surprised to learn that indigenous peoples – in parts of the Pacific, for example – are positive about the representation of their cultures in prestigious international museums.

Where specific works are known to have been illegally taken, it is understandable that their return may be keenly sought. But those works often represent only a minority, and a small minority, of those held in ethnographic museums. Artefacts are otherwise seen as ambassadors, as a basis for collaboration and research. Some activists may assume that historic artefacts are essentially absent from the countries of origin. But, from Fiji to Uganda, there are important museums that hold extensive collections. Where this is not the case, where communities have no access to historic heritage, there is a powerful case for the return of works held in Europe.

Yet return cannot be of public benefit in the absence of investment in museums, not only in their conservation facilities, but also in sustainable outreach and educational programmes.

The issue is not in the end where artefacts 'belong' but where they can be culturally and socially beneficial. Some collections should be returned to their nations of origin, but communities in Africa, Oceania and elsewhere should have access not only to their own heritage but also to the world art that is so accessible to multicultural publics in Europe. Historic artefacts are representative not only of humanity's achievements, but of the travel and traffic that have formed the world order we all now inhabit.