Arts & Theatre

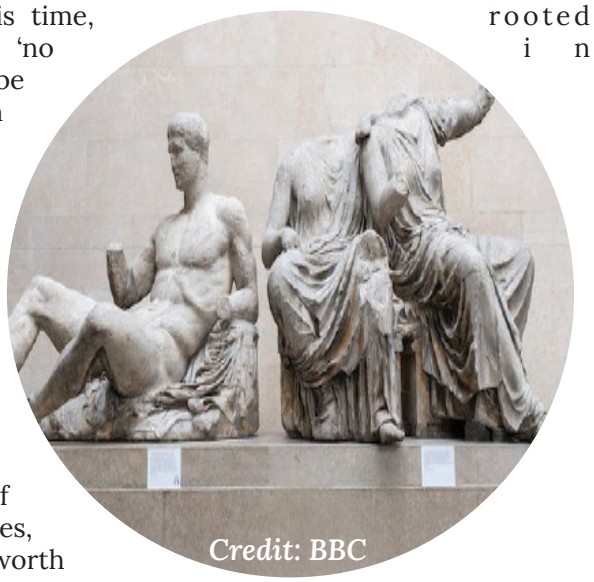
Opinion
Should Foreign Artefacts be Repatriated?

Ben Peacock (he/him)

In a world that has become increasingly socially progressive, and confronted the horrors of its past, it is no coincidence that the issue of whether artefacts should be returned from museums to countries that claim them has risen to prominence. Many artefacts housed in Western museums were taken illegitimately from their countries of origin in the age of colonialism. Hence, museums that continue to refuse to repatriate these artefacts are complicit in their colonial past. Repatriation must be encouraged if museums are to fit with the times and rectify the injustices of the past.

This issue has been brought to the forefront of public opinion in the past few months following Rishi Sunak's refusal to meet with the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, after his comments concerning the return of the Parthenon sculptures from the British Museum to Greece. Mitsotakis has been very vocal in his criticism of the presence of the Parthenon sculptures at the British Museum, comparing this to 'cutting the Mona Lisa in half' in an interview with the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg.

The sculptures were taken by Lord Elgin in 1801 following an agreement with the Ottoman sultan, as the Ottomans occupied Greece at this time, stating that 'no opposition be made' when Elgin and his team wished to take some pieces of stone and figures. Taking around half of the frieze consisting of many sculptures, 170 crates-worth in fact, certainly does not seem proportionate to this agreement. Further, since the agreement was made with an oppressive empire rather than the Greeks themselves, it raises questions about its legitimacy. Therefore, it seems inaccurate to justify the appropriation of the Parthenon sculptures based on an 'agreement' which was arguably illegitimate and also taken out of proportion by Elgin.


Credit: BBC

This is clearly a historical injustice and one that can only be rectified with the return of the marbles to the Parthenon, a view shared by the Greeks, Mitsotakis, and even over half of the British public in a recent survey. This approach reflects modern thinking on addressing our past and moving away from colonialist ideas, which museums such as the British Museum have failed to properly acknowledge. In the case of the Parthenon sculptures and other artefacts in museums with controversial histories, the proponents of these museums have attempted to justify this appropriation of artefacts from their countries of origin in similar ways. They often argue that museums can provide better care for artefacts and offer the public an easily accessible glimpse into various cultures.

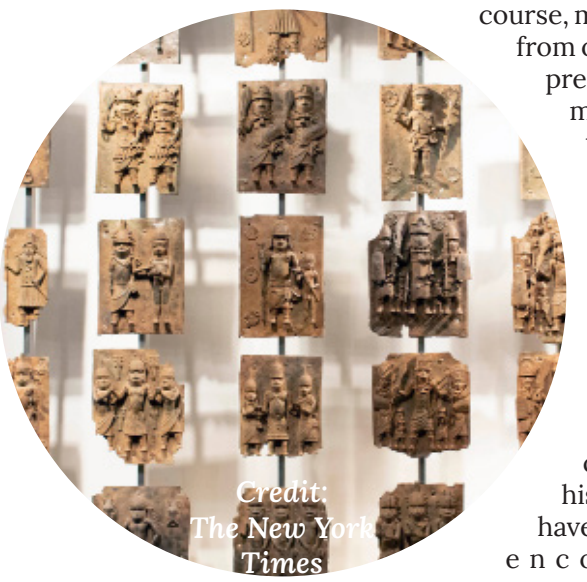
However, these reasons are not legitimate justifications in today's society. They are rooted in anachronistic ideas of the superiority of Western countries over the rest of the world. If I were to take your prized possessions and keep them because I think I can protect them better than you, would this justify me keeping hold of them? This argument is often used by those opposing repatriation, but it does not seem like a valid justification. For instance, anthropologist Elizabeth Weiss commented on the contrast in safety measures and rates of theft between European and American museums and some African and Middle-Eastern museums making it more likely that artefacts returned to these countries would be 'lost forever'.

Although there are some safety concerns, these artefacts are cultural property of an intrinsic value to their respective cultures, objects that allow people to trace their history. Due to their significant cultural value, it should be the responsibility of the culture to ensure the safety of their artefacts rather than foreign museums intervening in this process and depriving cultures of access to these artefacts. Jonathan Jones, an art columnist, also asserted that this idea that Western museums look after artefacts such as the Benin Bronzes, better than their countries of origin (in this case Nigeria) ever could is also deeply offensive and reflects anachronistic ideas of the superiority of Western countries to the rest of the world. We are no longer in the age of Empire, attitudes are changing, museums should keep up with the times and recognise that it is no longer appropriate to keep hold of artefacts based upon security concerns when they were never theirs to worry about in the first place.

Another reason deployed for denying the repatriation of artefacts to their native countries is the idea of 'universality', having artefacts from different cultures in one accessible place. James Cuno, a historian, argues that culture is universal and that having a place where artefacts from different cultures can be housed together encourages 'curiosity about the world and its many people'. In reality, these museums are not accessible to everyone and most importantly not to those whose ancestor's artefacts they house. For instance, a collection of the Benin Bronzes, from modern-day Nigeria, is displayed in the British Museum. For someone living in Nigeria to see these sculptures they would have to fly approximately 3,000 miles, incurring a cost of over £600, along with visa expenses.


Credit: Pragati-vadi

As a result, Theophilus Umogbai, the deputy director of the National Museum Benin, has stated that most Nigerians are unable to visit the Bronzes. Therefore, notions that culture is universal and should be accessible to all does not align with the practices of encyclopaedic museums like the British Museum, unless by universally accessible, Cuno means the accessibility of those living in the global north and not those to whom the artefacts belong. The majority of these encyclopaedic museums that house foreign artefacts are in the global north, as a result, accessibility is limited to those countries that were often the victims of colonisation. Thus the refusal to repatriate foreign artefacts, reflects a continued prioritisation of Western interests. Is this fair in a society that claims to have moved past the age of colonialism?


Credit: The New York Times

Repatriation is an essential step towards achieving social and cultural equality. Therefore, museums should consider claims made by other countries for artefacts housed within their walls and favour repatriation. Of course, many artefacts from other cultures present in museums are there for valid reason, but artefacts that find their way into museums which have disputed or potentially controversial histories should have repatriation encouraged.