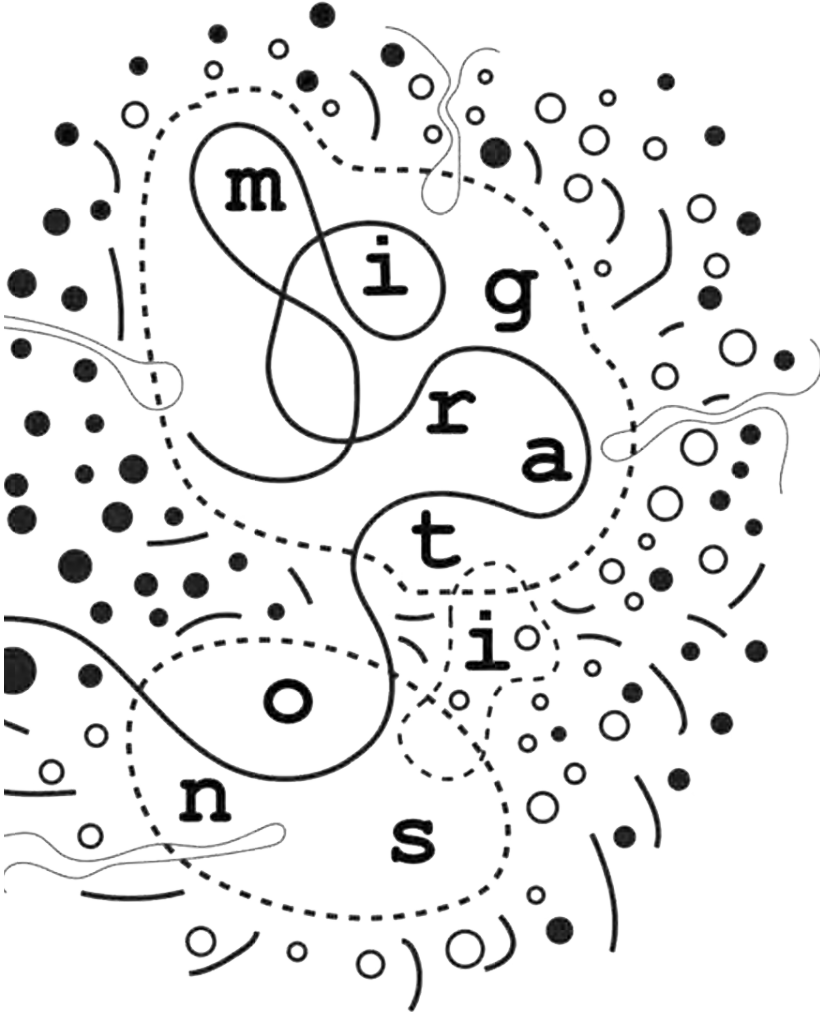


# Questions of Restitution

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## Session 8



## Session 8

# Questions of Restitution: Repair, Negotiations and Discussions on Expropriated Objects

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Restitution often involves questions of identity, memory and patrimony placed in relation to the “other”. The loss of cultural patrimony, plundered from one country and taken to another, has brought about heated debates across the globe. Central to these discussions are issues about decolonizing museums and the formulation of ethical standards for collecting objects. Further to this, is the adoption of legal frameworks and culturally sensitive models in handling cultural objects. Therefore, this session focused on the large range of ideas and practices surrounding the restitution of works of art as well as human remains, often violently taken from their original sites to other locations during periods of authoritarian regimes, wars, or colonial occupations. At the crux of the restitution debate is President Emmanuel Macron’s 2017 declaration at Ouagadougou to restitute African artworks in French collections to Africa. A follow-up to this declaration is the Sarr-Savoy report which recommended that artifacts that were taken away without consent should be returned. The report has generated several responses and reactions as well as negotiations and initiatives towards the repatriation of art and human remains to several African countries, from Post-Nazi-Germany to Greece, Egypt, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Cambodia, Namibia, and Tanzanian.

This session seeks to develop a wide debate on central aspects of the theory and practice of restitution across the world through the analysis of specific examples: What is the relationship between restitution and

power? How legitimate is the claim for restitution? What models and formats exist that can be applied in forging new relationships through restitution? Where lies the power of decision? In what ways can national laws be circumvented or changed? How plausible is the concept of shared ownership of objects? What does this concept mean? How can loans, instead of restitution, contribute to identity formation in view of the roles of myth and mythology in identity formation? Which role can technology play in this process? What is the relevance of provenance research to this debate? Does it hamper or aid the restitution process?

One of the main characteristics of the contemporary discussion on the restitution of artworks is the location of its epicenter in European and North American institutions, understandably so, since the artifacts are located there. This session adopts a more inclusive structure by inviting students, scholars, academics, museum professionals, artists from diverse regions and backgrounds, as well as people from local communities to take part in the debate.

# Ours Once More: The Polarized Discourses of the Parthenon Marbles in Contemporary Greece

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## **ABSTRACT**

Removed from the Athenian Acropolis by Lord Elgin in the 1800s and sold to the British Museum in 1816, the 5th century BC Parthenon marble sculptures have been at the center of Greece's cultural policy since the country's independence (1830). The official demand for the Marbles' repatriation was first placed in 1982 by Melina Merkouri, the then Greek Minister of Culture, who challenged the sculptures' ownership and elevated the international profile of the campaign. Over the years, the appeal for the return of the Marbles resurged on several occasions.

The present paper seeks to examine the polarized discourses which the demand for the restitution of the Marbles has evoked in today's Greece. Starting from the recent financial crisis in Greece and the subsequent European Union bailout (2015) to the current neoliberal Greek government (2019), who sought to link the restitution of the Marbles with the familiar discourse of the "uninterrupted continuity of the Greek nation." It tries to elaborate on the ways polarized discourses seek to instrumentalize the demand for the Marbles' restitution. On a second level, it seeks to register these conflicting discourses within the broader discussion about the ethical issues surrounding restitution and decolonizing culture.

## **KEYWORDS**

Parthenon Marbles; Restitution; Reunification; Greek Crisis; Decolonization.

### **Introduction**

The description that follows is an image that is common to people traveling to and from Eleftherios Venizelos International Airport – the main airport of Athens and the largest in Greece: A few years ago, voting booths were installed in the main departures area of the airport, asking departing visitors to give their opinion on whether or not the Parthenon Sculptures should be returned from the British Museum. The idea behind this action is that as the tourists passing through the airport will have visited both the Acropolis and the Acropolis Museum, this would allow them to make a reasonably informed judgment about whether the Acropolis Museum would be the most suitable location for the display of the sculptures.

In my view, the image of the voting booths summarizes the central position that the restitution of the Parthenon marbles holds in Greek cultural life. Indeed, the marbles restitution saga is the most common cultural discourse in contemporary Greece. It has almost been identified with the country's official cultural policy for decades.

The focus of this present paper is not so much on the restitution claim itself, but the multiplicity of discourses that the claim unfolds in Greece today. What is more, I would like to shed light on the recent developments that the restitution claim has created in the light of new historical research and the bicentenary celebration of the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire that in 1830 led to the establishment of the first independent Greek nation-state. I wish to make clear that I am not a scholar of restitution policies. Rather, my research on the topic was instigated by research tendencies that address Greece, its heritage and cultural production within the framework of postcolonial studies.

### **History of the removal**

By the term Parthenon Marbles, also known as the 'Elgin Marbles' although that term, instituted in 1816, is currently deprecated by the international community, we denote a group of sculptures depicting mainly mythological scenes from the fifth century BC Temple of Parthenon, held in the collection of the British Museum.

More specifically, the Museum holds half of the original frieze, fifteen metopes and seventeen pedimental fragments. Among the Museum's collections are also included a caryatid and a column from the Erechtheion on the Acropolis. A small number of fragments from the Parthenon sculptures can also be found in several other museums such as the Louvre and museums in Denmark, Austria and Italy.<sup>1</sup>

The story of the marbles is quite well-known: they were removed from the Parthenon in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Athens was still part of the Ottoman Empire, by Thomas Bruce, 7<sup>th</sup> Lord Elgin, British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire between 1799 and 1803. According to Elgin's own account, he asked the permission of the Sublime Porte to have artists measure, sketch, and make molds of important pieces of sculpture and architectural detail. The rationale for the marbles' removal was a later idea arising out of the concern he had about potential damage being done to important architectural artworks of Greece.

According to the British Museum officials, this permit was issued, as Lord Elgin claimed. However, the only written evidence today is that of an Italian translation of an "official letter" initially in possession of William St. Clair, a Cambridge historian, later acquired by the British Museum. According to it, Elgin is authorized "to take away any pieces of stone with old inscriptions or figures."<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary research casts doubt on the permit's authenticity. Turkish researchers Prof. Dr. Fatma Zeynep Aygen and Orhan Sakin have researched the Ottoman Empire's official records, proving that there was no official document issued by the Sultan that granted Lord Elgin permission to remove the sculptures from the Acropolis monument. The document the British Museum has in its archives is, in reality, a later Italian translation of an administrative letter from the Kaimakam of Constantinople to the authorities of Athens. According to the researchers, it is not a permit that allows the Parthenon to be stripped bare but a permit for the excavation of volumes of earth around the Parthenon.<sup>3</sup>

Elgin's collection remained private for the next 10 years. A public outcry arose over the removal of the sculptures, and Elgin was denounced for

vandalism and dishonesty by several writers of the era, including Lord Byron. A Parliamentary committee was subsequently established to examine the possibility of gaining the collection for Britain. Hence in 1816 the entire collection passed from Elgin to the British Museum for the sum of £35,000, to repay part of Lord Elgin's large personal debt.<sup>4</sup>

### **Repatriation as cultural nationalism discourse**

The first Greek claims for the repatriation of the Parthenon Marbles were already being made from the earliest days of the newly established independent Greek nation-state in 1830. The official national discourse argued for the uninterrupted continuity of the Greek nation, so the aim was to confirm modern Greece's direct lineage with classical Greece.<sup>5</sup>

Although the issue appeared in the texts of many writers in the intervening years, their restitution only became a matter of the country's official cultural policy in 1981. This was when the Minister of Culture and former actress Melina Merkouri made the restitution her personal crusade, and since then, her legacy has been intricately linked with the issue. Her efforts resulted in the first official request to the British government in 1982, after a decision by the Greek Ministerial Council, and the next year Greece submitted a special request before UNESCO.<sup>6</sup>

Back in the 1980s the discourse of the Greek claim was based on arguments focusing on the 'Greek identity of the Marbles', 'pride', and 'artistic excellence'. This discourse of cultural nationalism, which according to Juliette van Krieken-Pieters stresses the relationship between cultural objects and national heritage<sup>7</sup>, sought to raise patriotic feelings among Greeks, confirming thus the uninterrupted continuity of the Greek nation, and hence legitimizing their present as rightful inheritors of a glorious past.

Even though the state's official discourse has changed since then, several voices, even official ones, are still heard insisting on Greece's "moral right" over the marbles. It is not by chance that ever since the 1980s, the restitution of the Parthenon marbles has remained a central issue in the political discourse of Greece, often emerging as one of the so-called "National

Issues”. All political parties, from the ultra-nationalist to the Communist seem to cherish the claim for the return of the sculptures.<sup>8</sup>

### **Reunification discourse**

In the mid-1990s the official Hellenic government discourse changed, placing less emphasis on the argument for repatriation based on heritage “ownership” and moved towards highlighting the argument for the monument’s reunification, making a claim for the proper aesthetic appreciation of the entire monument. Academia-led and highlighting aesthetics, the reunification thesis privileges monumentality and the universal significance of the Marbles, considering the Parthenon not solely as a major Greek monument, but a landmark of World Cultural Heritage, whose symbolic capital urges its treatment in its entirety.<sup>9</sup> Despite being the official discourse, as Kalliopi Fouseki revealed in her research, the reunification argument does not necessarily manifest the views of the broader Greek public. Instead, the repatriation claim is emotionally grounded, summarizing the pursuit of the Greek people for social justice and identity reaffirmation in the global arena.<sup>10</sup>

The debate for the monument’s reunification continued steadily, as the country was preparing for the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, part of which was the institution of the New Acropolis Museum. Designed by Bernard Tschumi and built between 2001 and 2009, the new Museum summarized Greece’s 1990s decade of modernization, which ended with the collapse of Greek economy and, in 2008, resulted in the harsh crisis that has been tormenting the country ever since.

Described as a “new arc for the nation”, in the words of the then Greek prime minister, K. Karamanlis<sup>11</sup> the Acropolis Museum was expected to fulfil a very specific agenda, as it was planned to a great extent as a counter-argument against the British Museum’s claim that the Greeks had no suitable museum for the Parthenon marbles even if they ever returned to Athens. Moreover, it was to fulfill the main objective of unifying the artifacts and the rock of the Acropolis, with the three sculptural groups (the pediments, the frieze and the metopes) to be exhibited in visual contact with

the monument.<sup>12</sup> The reunification claim is clearly reflected in the exhibition design of the New Acropolis Museum. The visitor is called to engage with the notion of void and absence, with empty spaces left to indicate the missing pieces.<sup>13</sup>

### **The British Museum as a universal museum argument**

The British Museum's reaction to the reunification campaign was the development of a novel discourse which established its existence as "a universal museum". A notion that was propagated by the 2003 "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums", which was signed by the directors of eighteen of the world's most renowned museums.<sup>14</sup>

In reality this declaration is said to have been a request to support the British Museum, which at the time, according to its director Neil MacGregor, was experiencing grave alarm at how Greece was applying political pressure over the Marbles.<sup>15</sup> By introducing the concept of the universal museum, Neil MacGregor alluded to the institution's authority to represent all cultures. In his argument, museums do so, not from any singular perspective, but on behalf of the entire world,<sup>16</sup> allowing different stories to be told. In reality, as researchers such as Eleni Stefanou have pointed out that this argument is actually based on nineteenth-century British narratives and colonial ideas about the universalism of culture.<sup>17</sup>

The official discourse of the British Museum seems not to have changed since. The Museum's official website has dedicated a special webpage to hosting the Trustee's statement on the Parthenon sculptures, which seems to reproduce the institution's mission to tell the story of cultural achievement throughout the world, with the Parthenon sculptures being a significant part of that story.<sup>18</sup> And, what's more, Lord Elgin is still presented as acting "with the full knowledge and permission of the legal authorities of the day in both Athens and London".<sup>19</sup>

### **The discourse of debt**

Over the last decade, another discourse on the repatriation of the marbles has been fostered, which echoes the recent financial crisis in Greece and the

subsequent European Union bailout (2015). In this framework, the repatriation claim juxtaposes the debt to ancient ancestors with the Greek financial debt.<sup>20</sup> As Yannis Hamilakis states, the Parthenon Marbles are thus elevated into a symbol of plundering, which is not limited to that which Greece and its antiquities underwent from the Europeans in the 19th century, but also of the hardships it has been recently undergoing amidst the economic crisis, privatization, unemployment, etc.<sup>21</sup>

Several activist events have raised the Parthenon marbles as a symbol of looting. Hence, in 2015, the Jubilee Debt Campaign, that is the international campaign against debt in collaboration with the social justice international organization, Global Justice Now, organized a protest of solidarity at the Duveen Hall of the British Museum.

Obviously alluding to the imminent referendum of the 5th of July 2015, in which the Greeks would be asked whether or not they acceded to another series of austerity measures driven by EU, the activists raised a banner that read OXI No – No More Looting – Support Greece. Earlier in 2015, another protest in this same hall was organized by a team of Greek archaeologists and students along with members of the Coalition of Resistance and the Greek Solidarity Campaign with a banner that stated “Cannot pay. Will not pay. Solidarity with Greece.”<sup>22</sup>

Having the concept of debt at their core, researchers highlight the reversal of roles that these activist events sought: while Greece is a modern European borrower, Europe has to repay its huge cultural debt to Greece, from which it borrowed its classical values.<sup>23</sup> These events, contextualized as decolonial practices, are informed by theories that treated Greece in the light of a dominant crypto-colonial discourse, which came to inform the way historians interpret the country’s past. Although never a colony, Greece is among what anthropologist Michael Herzfeld calls the “buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed”, regions that acquired their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence.<sup>24</sup>

### **The loan issue and its polarized discourses**

Although over the years the appeal for the return of the Marbles has resurged on several occasions, in September 2019 the issue acquired new publicity as Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Greece's newly elected Prime Minister in an interview published in *The Observer* proposed the "loan" of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece on the occasion of the bicentenary celebration of the Greek War of Independence in 2021.

According to the Prime Minister, the timing was excellent for such a development, as this loan would be "a first step" for the final return of the Parthenon Sculptures. In return, the Prime Minister proposed to organize an archeological exhibition at the British Museum with very important objects which would be traveling abroad for the first time. For him, this mobility was justified by the "the concept of [promoting] our common European culture."<sup>25</sup>

Despite the fact that the Greek Prime Minister clarified that the demand for the final return of the Marbles remained intact, the Prime Minister's initiative was met with harsh criticism, as the leftist main Opposition party declared him naive for allowing the British Museum to appear as the rightful owner of the Parthenon sculptures.<sup>26</sup>

For her part the spokeswoman from the British Museum declared the institution's intention to consider any loan request, on the basis that Athens would acknowledge the preconditions placed upon any loan. One of which would be the acceptance of the museum's ultimate ownership of the Marbles.<sup>27</sup>

The Parthenon issue came back into the news in October 2021, when the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPRCP) of UNESCO issued a recommendation urging the British Museum to revisit the Greek request regarding the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles. This recommendation was actually the result of an address by the Greek Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, to UNESCO's Committee, instigated by the revelation that water was leaking into the British Museum's Greek galleries. The Minister raised concerns over the safety of the sculptures, despite the British Museum's later statement of reassurance.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the recommendation, the two parties have not moved from their initial positions. Thus, for the British any loan or any other treatment of the collection would be a matter for the trustees of the British Museum, not the UK government. The Greek party on other hand, in the words of the Greek Minister argued that the issue “is of an intergovernmental nature.” Plus, she seems to repeat the cultural nationalist discourse of the 1980s stating that “Greece has a valid and legal claim to demand the return of the sculptures to their place of birth.”<sup>29</sup>

The loan issue came again to the fore in early 2022. A fragment of the Parthenon temple, on loan from the Antonino Salinas Regional Archaeological Museum of Palermo, was displayed at the Parthenon Gallery of the Acropolis Museum. The "Fagan fragment" as it is commonly known was welcomed as “the first piece of the sculptures of the Parthenon to return to Greece from a foreign museum.”<sup>30</sup> In reality, the fragment from Sicily has not returned, but it is part of a loan agreement which offers the opportunity to the Acropolis Museum to display it for four years, a loan period which can be renewed for another four years. Nor is it the first time it is shown in Greece, as it was exhibited in 2008 and for two years at the Acropolis Museum before being returned to Palermo when the loan period expired.<sup>31</sup> Nor is it true that it is the first piece of the Parthenon marbles to be returned to Greece. The first piece to be returned was the fragment from the collection of the Heidelberg University Museum in 2006, depicting a figure holding an olive branch. It has been displayed at the Acropolis Museum since its establishment in 2008.<sup>32</sup>

One might wonder about the incorrect treatment of the monument’s restitution claim. However, the reply is more than obvious to the cultural workers living and working in Greece. Following neoliberal policies in the administration of cultural heritage, the most obvious example of which is the detachment of the Early Byzantine antiquities found during the excavations of the Venizelos metro station in Thessaloniki, a monumental ensemble whose destruction has caused the issuing of a Heritage Alert from the ICOMOS<sup>33</sup>, and the proposed separation of the country’s major archaeological museums from the state archaeological service<sup>34</sup>, the Greek government has

sought a story that would highlight the government's commitment to culture. Indeed, the Parthenon sculptures restitution case appears to be a priority the Mitsotakis government has chosen to rely on from the very first months of its coming to power. The Fagan fragment success story restores the Prime Minister's and the entire government's damaged image, which according to their view sets a precedent for Parthenon Marbles to return. The announcements were harshly criticized by the Opposition and the Association of Greek Archaeologists, who consider that an eventual loan request from the British Museum will undermine the campaign for the marbles permanent return.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the internal criticism the loan option has recently started to gather international supporters, such as an editorial opinion published in January 2022 in the London *Times*. According to the editorial board, the agreement made between Italy and Greece looks like a solution to the unresolved issue.<sup>36</sup> The *Times'* change of perspective was welcomed by the Greek press as a step towards the monument's reunification.<sup>37</sup>

### **Against white supremacy discourse**

According to several voices, among which was that of Elizabeth Harlowe writing in *Hyperallergic* in a piece published October 2021, the different treatment of the Parthenon marbles when compared to other cases of plundered patrimony such as the Benin Bronzes or the Maqdala treasures, is obviously based on the powerful myth of "Western civilization." Both the Greek government and the British Museum are considered by the article "as self-proclaimed inheritors of the classical tradition," that is, engaging in an act of interfamilial bullying. Considering the Parthenon marbles a white restitution case, she argues that the sculptures should not be returned before others which involved real violence, such as the case of the Benin Bronzes.<sup>38</sup>

Harlowe is not alone in her stance. Similar positions are also expressed by classicist and activist Lylaah Bhalerao, who argued that the current approach of the Greek campaign is integrated within the white supremacy discourse. In her argument Bhalerao questions how the display at the Acropolis Museum is differentiating itself from the aestheticized

approach of the Duveen Galleries, which ignores the decorative character of the Parthenon marbles as architectural sculptures, and emphasizes their whiteness and uniqueness. Acknowledging that there is no easy solution, she concludes that returning the Parthenon marbles will not be an act of decolonization, in the sense that it will not address the restitution issue outside the white supremacy discourse. Instead, she proposes a critical display to be initiated at the British Museum, which will center around the conditions of the sculptures' removal, and thus contribute to the restitution conversation.<sup>39</sup>

In a follow up article that also appeared in *Hyperallergic* Rafael Cardoso is sympathetic towards Marlowe's overall view that museums should be working towards implementing decolonization practices. However, he disagrees with her position that the Parthenon marbles should not be restituted before others, adding that her argument fails when it "creates a false equivalence between Greece and Britain." Cardoso continues by arguing that the plundering of the sculptures was not "a wrong done by White people to White people." And that one could not blame the Greeks for northern Europeans' appropriation of their ancient culture.<sup>40</sup>

Cardoso's approach places the sculptures' plundering within the broader framework of decolonization. In his views, he seems to be aware of research tendencies that during the last decades have been addressing the ideological implications of the establishment of the modern Greek state within the framework of postcolonial studies. From the same perspective Stathis Gourgouris has explored the ways in which, during the 18th century, Europe discovered in the myth of ancient Greece the paradigm for the organization of modern nation-states. Their founding narratives were based on an ancient Greek ideal, legitimizing thus their genealogies. Therefore, the Philhellenic movement that flourished in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries essentially embodied the need to create a Greek state that would connect the nations of Western Europe with classical antiquity. Informed by Edward Said's postcolonial thinking, Gourgouris' work treats the Western imaginary representations of Hellas, that is the myth of classical Greece, as a form of orientalism.<sup>41</sup> In this framework, the Western fantasy of the ancient Greek

ideal and the role it played in the formation processes of the new nation-state functioned as a cover for the power relations that developed within the colonialism of the Great Powers in the Orient.

**To conclude:**

**integrating the Greek claim in the decolonizing discourse**

To conclude, in this paper I sought to discuss the multiple, and often contradictory discourses that have developed in today's Greece on the issue of the Parthenon marbles restitution. Cultural nationalism gave way to the reunification discourse, which is still the dominant in the official repatriation campaign. At the same time, several voices contextualize the issue within the practices of decolonization.

Hence, I agree with Rafael Cardoso when he reminds his readers about the historical framework of the plundering. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Greeks were subject to domination by a foreign power. And in contradiction to the idealized art representations of the country and its inhabitants, racial classification theories considered modern Greeks an inferior and degenerate race.

This recent *Hyperallergic* debate, in reality, reveals the flawed part of the Greek argument in ethical terms. Seeking to differentiate its position from other decolonizing restitution claims, the Greek campaign highlights the reunification argument of a World Heritage monument. And to have a chance, the Greek part seems to be willing to acknowledge the ownership of the British Museum over them. In reality, the repatriation claim is instrumentalized by the current Greek government for political reasons with temporary benefits. Moreover, by accepting the loan alternative, the campaign of the Greek government itself is integrated within the crypto-colonial framework in which the official Greek policies have been developed over the last two centuries of the country's life as an independent state.

In my view, the right option would have been the opposite: acknowledge the Parthenon plundering as an act of colonial violence, which has continued, disguised as economic dependency on the Western powers,

throughout the two centuries of existence of the modern Greek state. It is only by acting within the framework of decolonial practices that the campaign will give justice to the restitution claim itself, and it will have the chance for its eventual resolution.

### **Post-scriptum (March 2023)**

The article was written in January 2022, with few additions being made in April of the same year. Since then, a series of events have taken place advancing the case of the restitution of the Parthenon sculptures.

In May 2022, the Antonio Salinas Regional Museum and the Italian government have decided to return the “Fagan fragment” permanently, an act which was hailed as the first in a step toward bringing back the other sculptures of the Parthenon from the British Museum.

In early 2023, negotiations between the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and George Osborne, Chair of the Trustees of the British Museum, began in secret. According to Osborne, efforts are being made to devise a “hybrid” deal regarding the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles, in what he hopes will be a mutually beneficial arrangement for both sides. In reality, and as the 1963 British Museum Act currently prohibits a full return of the artefacts, the Chairman proposes a series of loans with a swap of other antiquities, such as the frescoes of Santorini, dating back to 1700 BCE, which will guarantee the return of the Parthenon marbles. At the same time, the Greek government keeps insisting that no acknowledgement of the British Museum's legal ownership will be made, sticking to the official position of the country towards the Parthenon sculptures. While the negotiations appear to reach a dead-end, the Greek Prime Minister expressed his hopes that the repatriation of the marbles is a target that could be achieved after the elections that are to take place this Spring.

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# A 21st-Century Perspective on International Cultural Exchange

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## **ABSTRACT**

It may be time to ask whether international museum exchange initiatives could update earlier utopian ideals on which museums were founded, i.e., institutional collections in service of regional or national public experience and education, to a purpose that serves audiences beyond museums' physical boundaries.

Could we consider a place for artifact stewardship as part of a global museum enterprise built on a foundation of collection-sharing through institutional partnerships? Could museum collections evolve into a universal library, with each museum contributing to a meta-collection, a new ideal where artifacts circulate to benefit a global public?

The concept of ownership currently being challenged by tribal descendants and nation-states has been a catalyst to move the dialogue from "ownership" to "stewardship." An international museum enterprise built on sharing and mutual trust holds the promise of museums becoming more responsible and engaged institutional citizens of the world.

## **KEYWORDS**

Cultural exchange; Repatriation; Museums; Collection Storage; Partnerships

This paper might appear to counter the restitution theme of this session, but that's not what I intend.

I'm offering what some might consider an unrealizable dream given the survivalist and tactical nature that defines much of museum practice today. It's a dream that comes close to collective stewardship of the world's cultural heritage. I offer it not as an alternative to present-day repatriation and restitution initiatives but as an addition to those same ambitions.

My proposal — this dream of mine, which I offer from the perspective of a former museum professional — is based on the view that, on the one hand, repatriation alone will never permanently and completely alter the collecting identity of long-established museums around the world; and, on the other, that objects kept in storage, particularly in the largest museums in the West, will be increasingly harder to justify politically, socially and economically as the century goes on. I believe what some would call "retentionist hoarding", in the guise of protection and scholarly responsibility will be more complex and harder to justify in future decades.

Most museum observers would accept that, despite the energy of recent discourse regarding the repatriation and restitution of cultural property, the return of the vast majority of pillaged objects now residing in public collections other than those of their country of origin will never fully readdress the number of objects taken in times past. We accept this despite our greater collective consciousness that the Enlightenment not only provided the rationalist taxonomic structure and aesthetic philosophy for creating museums but also spawned the intellectual foundation for the legitimization of empire and its corresponding notions of racial superiority. As we know, these factors, along with nineteenth-century nationalist ambitions, resulted in the justifications for institutional collecting that so many today are focused on addressing. But repatriation alone will not deplete the enormous collection depth of western museums that were established in the past. Therefore, I maintain that we need other means of better utilizing the vast quantity of stored collections for audiences in the later 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. Where do we put the 'orphaned' objects, decontextualized as they long have been, split from their location of origin now that history has

upended our knowledge of that location and that original location is lost forever. Returns alone can't address the enormous number of works involved, especially when considering the practical and legal barriers that will continue to remain.

We have seen that recent repatriation initiatives undertaken by European countries in the multi-national aftermath of the French government's Sarr-Savoy report are currently few despite dominating media attention, which seems to run in parallel to questions that capture public interest. For example, "who will next give up their Benin bronze to the new museum being designed by a star architect in Benin City?" Or, "will all the Parthenon marbles move to a museum closer to its original context in Athens?". Even though we can expect that these high-profile acts of repatriation will be realized at some future time, others will very likely continue to be numerically modest concerning the number of objects taken over the previous two centuries.

I ask, therefore, whether it's time to initiate energetic programs representing a more collaborative form of stewardship, display, and learning, with collections, exhibited and variously interpreted at different sites around the globe through expanded, long-term international partnerships. I ask, too, whether international museum exchange initiatives could update ideals of public experience, education and learning to a purpose that goes beyond traditional notions of ownership and ones that can also serve audiences beyond a museum's physical boundaries. Could we consider a place for artifact stewardship in the global museum enterprise? One that is built on foundations of sharing through such partnerships; looking at museum collections as almost a kind of universal library, with each institution contributing to a meta-collection; a new ideal where artifacts circulate for the benefit of a global public.

Such initiatives, even if only some are realized, would result in greater access to the vast number of works hidden in the storage facilities of our larger museums, taking them from the invisible to the visible, recontextualizing and reinterpreting them for new audiences, as these programs make a further contribution to social and humanistic discourse. It

would also bring institutions and their staffs closer together over jointly held values of care and interpretation of historical objects for learning as well as experience.

It's a program of collection exchange that would be a significant addition to acts of repatriation and restitution. More importantly, it's a program that recognizes that a growing public in origin countries will want museum experiences involving objects other than ones representing their own national heritage, as the appetite and curiosity for works of art from many cultures grows. Such partnership programs could be decades long, involving many objects. They could be exchanges accompanied by the possibility of near-permanent ties between institutions, a talisman for cultural contact and understanding, as these objects move across borders. Some might fear that the resulting exchanges would bring only the mediocre up from storage, but such a view overlooks the potential of curatorial imagination and administrative initiative when programmatic creativity is directed at scholarly interest linked to public benefit.

The storage of collections represents a major cost for arts institutions, a conundrum given that many museums see access to their publicly held collections as a special responsibility. Despite professional efforts ranging from open storage schemes to regional branches for some national museums, the vast majority of the millions of works in museum storage — from those in the West that house so-called “encyclopedic” collections to those of national museums and archeological sites in origin countries — remain, for the most part, off view. They are available by special appointment and not easily accessible to the general public.

While I believe this dream can be achieved in future decades through ambitious institutional leadership, numerous factors keep such a goal from being realized in the near term and on a large scale. In starting to list them, I do it not as a deterrent for moving forward but as a challenge to the profession and to those who believe in the values underpinning the vision. Immunity from seizure agreements and insufficiently funded national indemnity schemes to assure lenders of the safety of artifacts are currently significant barriers to more accessible exchange, along with current policies

of many cultural ministries in countries where objects have the status of national patrimony that too often limit the length of loans to foreign institutions. Thus, a considerable number of objects, often archaeological objects, remain little seen as more and more are excavated to join them. In addition, the offers of loans of potentially repatriated objects can be looked on skeptically by many in origin countries fearing the perception of defeat in a repatriation claim by accepting such a loan.

There are also internal museum operational issues that are a deterrent. Museum professionals would certainly proclaim an interest in sharing collections if asked. Still, institutions are, by nature, conservative organizations whose preservation mission is supported by the attitudes and professional training of curators and conservators. While the profession has been able to transfer objects with care far more successfully in recent years than in the past, there's a reluctance to move art and artifacts from a museum gallery or an institutional storage space to the uncertainty of damage at an exhibition location that one does not fully control. It's often easier to say "no" to exchange opportunities when asked.

Many larger museums also see themselves as study centers for research with collections available and accessible to scholars who visit their destination. Open storage has been an institutional answer to accessibility, a taxonomic if not excitingly curated opportunity for display that unfortunately harks back to the "cabinet of curiosity" exhibition form. And to many professionals, the even more popular idea of a fully realized, digitally accessible collection as a virtual means of sharing also passes as a substitute for exchange in spite of the fact that all those associated with museums accept that the digitized object is no substitute for the experience and power of the real, the foundation of the museum experience. And why lend, it is thought by some, conscious as they are that the largest museums in the West's mega-cities attract an increasing number of visitors from around the world to their museum sites?

Partnerships are also hard, especially when institutions are uneven in their resources and have different value systems based on history, mission, economic realities, and cultural traditions. It's a challenge to reconcile the

different perspectives of potential museum partners when institutions are at different stages of development in terms of conservation, security, curatorial expertise, and financial support. There's also skepticism of schemes that attempt to be "global," superseding the prioritization of fostering regional identity in a period when works of art and other forms of material culture are regularly linked to national and ethnic pride. And, for some, there's also an obstacle in the attempt to form a partnership between nationally centered art and archeology collections common in museums in origin countries and the international collections of the so-called "encyclopedic" museums of the West — albeit for others this challenge could catalyze an imaginative partnership program.

One could cite parenthetically here that the notion of the museum as "Encyclopedia" has been and continues to be challenged in new museum buildings being realized around that world. Taxonomic sequencing in these newly formed institutions is being shed as professionals curate with alternative, often thematic goals reflecting current intellectual engagements as well as audience interest. Most curators and directors not engaged in new museum expansion programs, like the Los Angeles County Museum, wish they had an opportunity of rethinking their architecture and exhibition spaces to encourage the more innovative curatorial ambitions of our time that younger staff crave, installations that can also more effectively attract the interests of younger audiences

Indeed, we are well familiar with the current pressures encouraging museums to rethink their interpretive programs and other historical practices at this time of social change and political unrest. At the same time, we have to recognize one of the most significant barriers to international partnerships, that is, the transactionally centered museum culture of the recent past, focused as it has been on institutional growth or survival through the development of ever-expanding sources of income. This direction in a museum's value system has come to see collections as a special kind of capital, a source for operating revenue or an extension of an institution's "brand" rather than cultural assets whose essential purpose is public experience, learning and knowledge. This reality is not only evident in

examples like the Louvre Abu Dhabi or the growing number of satellites of western museums recently being realized in China. The fees generated by exhibitions, both large and small, represent the “commodification of culture” values that are driving many institutions.

“Art for money” is indeed one form of exchange, but who can “play to play” remains an issue for many museums around the world, including those in South Asia, Africa or South America, or smaller museums in any country. This “uneven playing field” regarding financial resources is heightened by other factors of unevenness as one examines museums internationally. When an institution is at an earlier stage of growth in terms of conservation, security, curatorial sophistication and expertise (not only when they’re funded more modestly), one can ask whether such an institution could ever join in a global partnership.

However, unevenness of resources and the difficulty of institutional a and country to country partnerships will change as the world’s economies rebalance in the future. We see evidence of this in the new institutions being formed in Africa and India. These asymmetries of today should not be seen as long-term barriers but as current opportunities. They allow us to learn both from start-up partnerships and from the reconception of existing programs at certain of the largest institutions.

For all these reasons, museum professionals should not be stifled by the seeming impossibility of current administrative and diplomatic hurdles. Such a dream can only be realized incrementally, one program at a time, driven by entrepreneurial individuals leading specific institutions and professionals willing to draft partnership programs supported by governing bodies. Initially, they are likely to be funded beyond existing museum budgets, including private individuals who believe in the vision. It’s through practice, not through theoretical, ideological posturing, that real change can evolve. Trial ventures resulting in successful outcomes are the only way to address existing obstacles. The wisdom of partnerships begun and practiced in the near term will prove increasingly far-sighted in the longer term, as currently disparate institutional resources and internal cultures re-align over time.

The vast museum collection storages of unseen objects will be increasingly difficult to justify and to sustain economically, politically and socially. Governing bodies, as well as the public, will begin to take greater notice. Furthermore, as the years go on, the “what’s in it for me” question that emanates from parties currently coming to the table for potential partnership discussions could and should include the benefit of professional cooperation and stronger programmatic impact as staffs work together and the broader public enjoys the benefits of such initiatives. Recognizing monetization in exchange as simply one form of benefit, but not the only form, will result in more meaningful, less transaction centered interactions in the future, contributing to a flattening of the playing field among museums. In this process, staff and audience will become part of a larger world, exciting the public in new ways with benefits both direct and indirect.

The museum sector that exists today is the result of more than 200 years of history, one that has evolved by adapting its founding ideals to ever-changing public attitudes and policies, civic and national priorities, economic and aesthetic philosophies. I suggest that ownership claims currently being challenged by tribal descendants and nation-states in the form of repatriation and restitution claims can exist alongside and, simultaneously, be a catalyst in moving museum discourse from “ownership” to “stewardship” through the promise of international partnerships built on sharing and mutual trust. Museums must think creatively now as they face decades of service in the future. This goal, even if only partly realized, would result in more responsible institutions as they expand the publics they serve, both near and far.

# Repatriating Histories. The Subaltern Voices of Museum Objects

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## **ABSTRACT**

Neil MacGregor's BBC Radio 4 program (and subsequent book) *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010) was a resounding international success. The argument, however, had its flaws. Nearly ten years after the radio program was broadcast, it is time to return to its narrative, particularly to the formerly subaltern nations it left out. Where are the stories of the objects as seen by people who once used them? In what ways do colonial collecting practices inform the knowledge about an object? How can new object biographies be incorporated into museums display? Do they have the power to support calls for repatriation?

This paper introduces ideas that originated in a 2019 workshop in Kingston, Jamaica, to include new object histories largely written by participants of the 'Global South'. Its ultimate goal is to address broader questions concerning art historical methods and museums' role in tomorrow's multicultural societies. It works under the premise that an object's original function and later (colonial) appropriation are integral parts of its biography. Knowledge forms were rarely stable across different regions, borders, and periods; it is exactly in processes of motion, transit, and transmission that knowledge forms and contents were defined and put to work. In other words, one object can have 100 histories of 100 worlds.

## **KEYWORDS**

Museums; Heritage; Decolonization; Repatriation; Colonialism.

### **Introduction**

Why hold a workshop on the British Museum in Jamaica? — one of the administrators at work asked, shaking his head in disbelief. The reputation of Jamaica as a tropical paradise is so ingrained that it does not immediately register as an ideal meeting venue to launch a project on colonial collecting for many people in Britain. The images that spring to their minds are those of beaches and reggae music. The fact that the broader public might not be aware that Jamaica is a former colony of the British Empire says plenty about Britain's approach to its colonial past. Nor might people who visit the British Museum be aware that it was in Jamaica where Sir Hans Sloane compiled the kernel of London's British Museum and Natural History Museum collection in the eighteenth century. Or that the transatlantic slave trade provided the infrastructure that allowed Sloane and his European contemporaries to build their collections, supplying specimens for Sloane and others.<sup>1</sup>

Those were the traces we were looking for. We — that is, a growing international and diverse network of researchers, curators, activists, artists, and heritage stakeholders from now more than fifteen countries, mainly from the 'Global South' — initially met at the University of West Indies (UWI Mona) campus in Kingston, in 2019. The campus was formerly a plantation site and graveyard for enslaved people. We experienced the site as multi-layered, inextricably, and perennially linked to colonial trauma and violence. During the meeting, we engaged with heritage professionals and explored new avenues for developing stories about museum objects with each other. How many stories can one object contain?<sup>2</sup>

By shifting the geographical focus to a former British colony and choosing Kingston as a venue to reflect on the British Museum's collection, my hope, as the organizer, was to find new pathways and avenues to these troubled histories in both a metaphorical but also a physical and material sense. Where are the stories of museum objects presented as seen by people who once used them? Where is indigenous knowledge presented; who is at the centre of museum narratives, and who is on their margins? How is knowledge about museum objects informed by colonial collecting practices; and how is this context presented in museums today? How can formerly

excluded voices be empowered to tell their own histories beyond these frameworks? How can such new object biographies be incorporated in museum display, and do they have the power to support calls for repatriation? If objects are not returned to their countries of origin, how can their malleable stories be 'returned' to the museum in a sustainable but porous way?

The workshop grew into a collaborative project, the approach of which I will discuss in the following sections of this paper. After providing some context, I will reflect on new methods such a project could potentially yield, particularly concerning object biographies. I will close with an outlook to the future, and reflect on the relationship between objects and humans, a thread that will be persistent throughout this paper. In doing so, I will look into the practicalities of carrying out such a project, including geopolitical challenges and visa regimes.

### **Context**

In Europe's museums, empire persists and proliferates in the present through material representations and celebrations of the past. Colonial exploration is still rendered mainly as a triumphalist and heroic narrative, leaving little room for alternative interpretation. Museums, however, have a responsibility. The objects they contain play a crucial role in producing concepts of ethnicity, gender, class, and racial identity. They impact how audiences perceive not just artifacts in public life, but history itself.

What if important aspects of history are eradicated? What if these legacies persist in ongoing global injustice and do not just lie in the past? What if nations and communities desperately want some objects to be returned? In light of the repatriation debate, the ways in which objects are currently contextualized in many museums warrant urgent intervention. Our discussion is naturally embedded in recent debates surrounding, for example, France's plans for the repatriation of colonial objects as announced by President Emmanuel Macron. There has also been increased pressure on museums such as Berlin's new and problematic Humboldt Forum, a

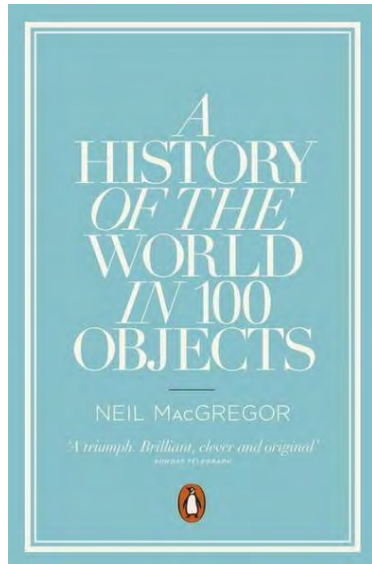
reconstruction of the imperial Berlin Palace in the heart of the city, which now also houses colonial collections.



**Fig. 1.** Humboldt Forum Creator: Alexander Schippel  
Copyright: © 2020 by Alexander Schippel

With several curators on board, including some directly involved in projects at the British Museum and the Humboldt Forum, we hope that our project can also advance conversations about repatriation. In other words, we are inside the museum but also outside of it.

Our starting point was Neil MacGregor's successful program on BBC Radio 4 and the subsequent book "A History of the World in 100 Objects" (Fig. 2); at the time, he was the director of the British Museum.<sup>3</sup>



**Fig. 2.** *A History of the World in 100 Objects* book cover, by Neil MacGregor

Both were released in 2010. Neil MacGregor's approach impacted future museum projects as he became one of the founding directors of the above-mentioned institution, the Humboldt Forum. The radio program reached new audiences with the ambition to provide a global outlook and to present history through the lens of 100 objects. Yet the argument had its flaws: the program was seen by some as a prime example of exclusion. Colonialism had ultimately produced not just inequalities of power but also a distorted view of history. The program was silent about the controversy raging over repatriating artefacts, almost completely ignoring the provenance of objects. Instead, it reinstated the idea of a 'view from nowhere' and everywhere at the same time. It presented the museum as a place to see the world, yet without reflecting on how the institution itself obtained and reframed the objects to create its own seemingly universal narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Nearly ten years after the program's release, we return to the subaltern voices it had left out. But unlike the museum objects now in London, we also 'returned' to Kingston as an original collection site to make the point that one object contains "100 histories of 100 worlds". This has resulted in a publication project with a digital website (Fig. 3) created by our editor Benjamina Efua Dadzie.



**Fig. 3.** *100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object* website

The music that opens all our podcasts is played by the Ghanaian Akan band Kwan Pa. They were interviewed by Benjamina Efua Dadzie to show that famous British Museum objects like the Akan drum (Fig. 4) are not only symbols of slavery but also live on today.<sup>5</sup>

Our goal is to develop new methods, approaches, and formats to achieve more than an alternative history of the British Museum. Instead, we work towards a multilateral fusion of object histories and presented legacies in museums and their collections as seen by contributors from the 'Global South'. We aim to develop a new vocabulary and discourse for an ongoing debate. Institutional barriers and ethnic discrimination in the museum and academic sector remain high. We, therefore, operated with the ultimate goal of supporting the democratization of often exclusive museum spaces. This would seek to recognize and empower diverse ethnic audiences and their material past.



**Fig. 4.** Museum number: Am, SLMisc. 1368.  
Drum made of wood, root (cedar), skin (deer).  
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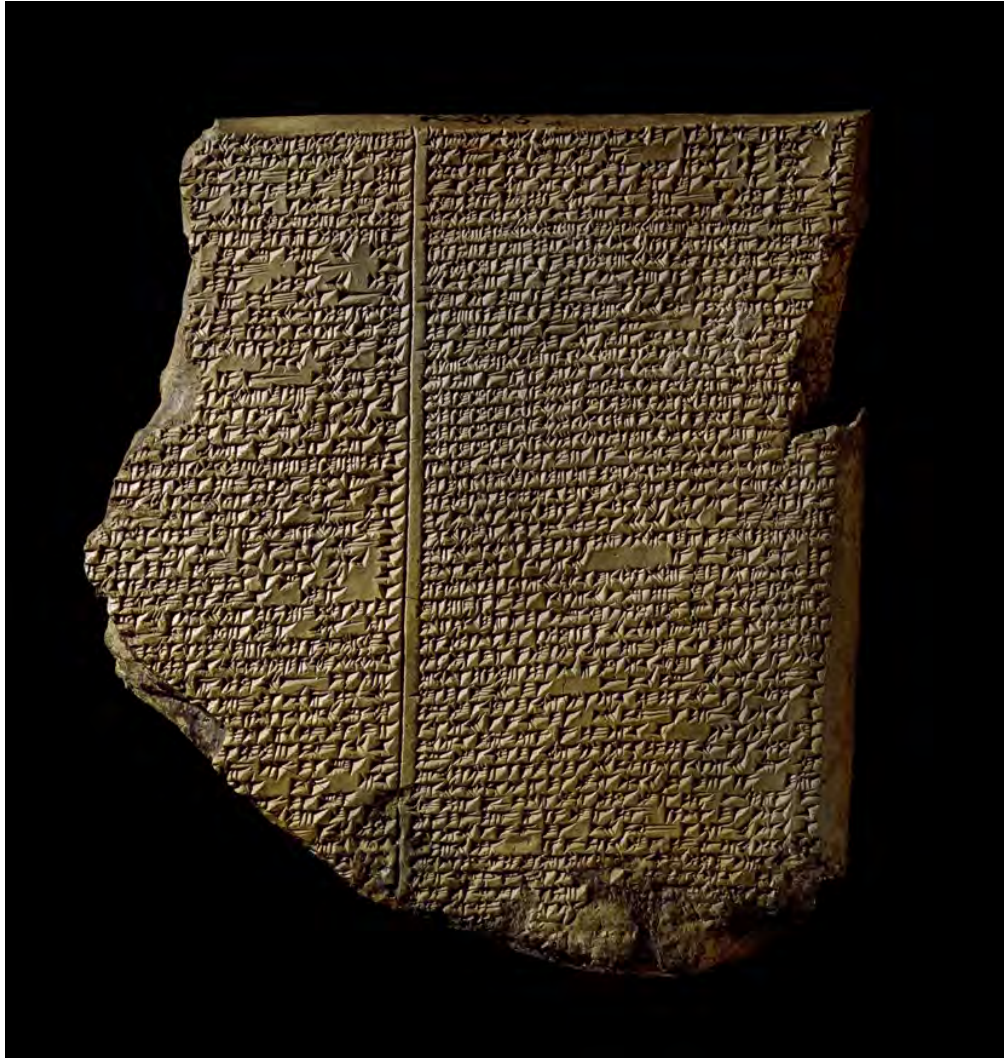
For our launch event, as well as for the website and the Call for Action that followed from it, each contributor picked an object from the British Museum podcast and presented ideas on how its narrative could be expanded through new stories and approaches, and often new objects. For

instance, there are objects from Peru, Honduras, and Mexico, but remarkably none from Brazil.

What can be said about such gaps? What can be said about British Museum attractions such as the Rosetta Stone – on which Heba Abd El Gawad spoke –, the Benin plaques – discussed by Sani Yakubu Adam –, the Gweagal Shield – put forward by indigenous Australian Leah Lui-Chivizhe – by people from the countries who once owned them, or still use them (or would use them, if they were around)?<sup>6</sup>

Abd El Gawad, for example, showed how the people from Rashid were, in fact, involved in the decipherment process of the stone, so why was Champillon singled out as a hero?<sup>7</sup> Subhadra Das pointed out to what extent the Parthenon sculptures represent largely unquestioned ideologies about race and difference, which ultimately imply that (white) Europeans are superior.<sup>8</sup> This historical context is not explained on museum labels. Nor is the fact that Greece wants to see the Parthenon sculptures returned. All authors work under the premise that an object's original function and its later (colonial) appropriation are integral parts of an object's biography. Such functions were often erased through its journey into the museum and replaced by a 'European version' of the story.<sup>9</sup>

The scarcity of attempts to illuminate the stories of people and (often ongoing) local practice in relation to objects is troubling. Instead, fixed in a postcolonial context, imperial vision underlies the master narratives of many European museums. Depending on their colonial past, their history has long been told as a continuing narrative of Europe's involvement in various regions of the world. This one-dimensional narrative was perpetuated by the 'two-dimensional' documents in archives that surround these objects. Yet archives are rarely neutral in value. Institutionally managed documents, practices, and ideologies thus often fail to give credit to engagement with the material past outside disciplinary frameworks, which museums often rely on. So how can 'indigenous archives', oral histories, social media, personal memories, fiction, poetry, performance, photographs, and artworks present alternative 'counter-archives' to construct new stories about objects?<sup>10</sup>



**Fig. 5.** Museum number: K.3375  
Epic of Gilgamesh, tablet 11, story of the Flood.  
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Many of our contributions regarding objects across the globe from New Zealand, Namibia to Mexico share one concern: the relationships between objects and the people who care(d) for or about them. A collection of ‘alternative object histories’ (used here to indicate something deviating from the dominant, not the ‘normal’) must, therefore, also go beyond established academic and curatorial approaches to address the stories and people that

remain invisible in archives. Addressing the functions objects had, or indeed still have, the contributions show how excluded voices can be empowered to tell their own histories beyond these frameworks.

Some contributors thus used a more inclusive range of philosophies that injected a much-needed critique into a discourse dominated by Western-style scholarship. Several addressed local resistance to colonial collecting and preservation practices or the aftermath of scientific exploration, exploitation, and slavery. Others showed how Western disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology or art history promoted and underpinned ideologies of human variation and 'race', and vice versa. Others alluded to the 'divide and rule' approach of museums: by neatly separating and 'handpicking' certain ethnic groups, they erased others from their not-so-universal narrative to make it their own, ignoring that both objects and people were, in reality, rarely stable, but in constant transition and movement.

My own case study looked at a famous cuneiform tablet from Ancient Mesopotamia (Fig. 5). Neil McGregor's podcast focussed on Ancient Mesopotamia as the origin of writing and the cradle of Western civilization.<sup>11</sup> My version talks about nineteenth-century British Imperialism, which sought not only to excavate these kind of ancient objects to appropriate them as the origins of European history but also to exploit the Middle Eastern landscape by extracting oil. What was further erased were the stories of the modern people of these lands who excavated these objects with their own hands.<sup>12</sup>

To highlight that these connections are ongoing, my object biography ends with the chants of protesters at the British Museum, which took place when an exhibition on King Ashurbanipal opened a few years ago.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, the show was sponsored by the fossil fuel giant BP. This exhibition displays objects excavated during the above-mentioned imperial nineteenth-century excavation. When I titled this paper *Repatriating Histories*, I did not always refer to the repatriation of an object but also to repatriating parts of a history that was formerly erased, acknowledging the economic exploitation that led to ongoing conflict, war, and inequality in this particular region. Repatriating

that history is the first step towards achieving justice and more equal global power balances.

### **Methods: The Future of Object Biographies**

Doubts are also part of the project. Can an entirely new History of the World be told through a certain number of objects? The concept as such a highly reductive and yet, at the same time, seductive idea used by many since, deserves to be critiqued. As has been the case in India, the '100 Objects model' can be deployed at a time of vehement nationalist resurgence, a recurring theme in our discussion. This raises more general and important questions about the role of Western museums in shaping museological practices elsewhere, and the format we seek to pursue with our own work.<sup>14</sup>

Our 'new histories' must be not just different methodologically and multilingual, but also dynamic and open for future additions and narratives that others might want to add. Considering this, what could we potentially offer in terms of new methods?

Object biographies are an established approach in heritage and museum studies.<sup>15</sup> Recently, they have been used to better understand the life cycle of museum objects removed during colonialism. However, this journey was rarely circular. Research has often focussed on how 'non-European' objects have 'traveled' towards Europe. Here, the major goal was to fill in formerly erased gaps in the objects' provenance rather than the meaning they held before they left their original context. This approach has therefore been criticized as Eurocentric.

When repatriation and restitution are at the forefront of public debate, it seems valid to ask what a more equal future of object biographies might look like. The ultimate goal will be to address broader questions that concern art historical methods and the role of museums in the multicultural societies of tomorrow. We work under the premise that an object's original function and its later (colonial) appropriation are integral parts of its biography. Knowledge forms were rarely stable across different regions, borders, and periods; rather, it is exactly in processes of motion, transit and

transmission that the forms and contents of knowledge were defined and put to work. In other words, one object can have 100 histories of 100 worlds.

Instead of only asking what the objects' meaning was before they were removed, however, one might also ask what their meaning will be, if and when they are returned. More specifically, can histories be repatriated even if an object is not repatriated?

Recently, I took part in a project in Ghana involving a repatriation case concerning objects in the Berlin collections, where different stakeholders have different versions of an object's history, and it's unclear to whom it should be returned.<sup>16</sup> Potentially conflicting narratives, in other words, yield their own story. What kind of object biographies will matter the most? Who should tell them, and for whom, as objects are on their often-difficult journey back to their place of origin, usually after having spent years in storage?<sup>17</sup> If objects are repatriated, how do origin communities deal with the 'poisoned' history that adheres to these objects? And how can they deal with the potential void if no repatriation takes place to start the process of healing? Many agreed that the issue of return remains problematic as nationalism is on the rise. This also refers to white elites in control of the heritage sectors in many countries of origin. At the core is the question of the importance of such histories for achieving more equal and truly intercultural conversations about the legacies of colonialism and the meaning of heritage on an international but also on an internal, national level.

### **Futures**

We aim to be a dynamic platform that centres how different communities benefit from decolonisation efforts, not simply and primarily Western museums. Therefore, rather than setting the terms of the conversation, our grassroots initiative intends to center on what different communities need from decolonisation. The idea of flat hierarchies and collaboration lies at the project's methodological core. To that end, our project recently asked our editors and authors for input to jointly decide which role 100 histories should play in future discussions related to decolonization, repatriation, restitution

and reparation. What can we, as a digital platform, do? For which purpose is project funding needed as we approach the next steps?<sup>18</sup>

As a grassroots project, we have hardly any research funding. An Activist Museum Award enabled us to hire two graduate students to help us organise a future World Café event series to facilitate conversations between researchers, heritage and museum practitioners in the Global South.

They will act as focus groups for the evaluation of our website and serve as an opportunity to co-develop the future direction of the project. We plan to eventually expand the range of public engagement capabilities of the website, as we look to develop this resource to become an interactive space of dialogue rather than just dissemination. Our first World café took place in September, 2022, and it addressed three themes: Objects, Institutions and People. We asked all participants the following questions: What can the *100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object* website and project do to make possible these changes? What would you like to see research grant money funding used for?

*100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object* is naturally concerned with objects, which was our first theme of discussion. We agreed that our focus should be to connect objects and stories to local/source communities. Although objects are important, they are not always enough to fulfill community needs, desires and priorities at any given time. As one of the participants, Golda Ha-Eiros, a curator from Namibia, movingly put it: in a German museum storage, the object is just a number, in Namibia it has meaning to people.<sup>19</sup> In some museums, there are no objects — they are taken away during colonialism or for political reasons, for example. But the idea of a museum without objects is not so radical; it already exists in Palestine or the Museum of British Colonialism. Might this be a model we can aim to replicate? Can *100 Histories* act (digitally) as a horizontal platform that moves away from an object-centered approach towards centring people and their stories — holding as opposed to simply hosting them?

Under the umbrella of the second theme — *institutions* — participants talked about Western narratives and taxonomies and how these have shaped both the objects in our collections and also the foundations of

our institutions. Institutions are resistant to change, and yet they tend to dominate the discussions about repatriation, indeed, and decolonization by extension. Although these institutions (predominantly Western) do have the resources to finance ambitious and intellectually expansive projects, these also come with the pressure that funding structures brings along. Taking into account financial, administrative, digital, political, and language barriers, we aim to shift the conversation away from Western museums. Yet, while it is our goal to decenter museums, and of course, ultimately, the British Museum, it is also necessary to engage museums, as they are where financial resources and power often lie.

The idea of operating “ethically” needs to recognize the uneven reality of the world we are operating in. We are both outside and inside the museum to create a dialogue that will lead to a greater multitude of stories in institutional spaces. We also want to recognize that each country, including those in the Global South, has its own decolonization movement.

Finally, under the headline of *people*, we discussed our long-term goal to center how different communities of association and origin can benefit from decolonization efforts, not only Western museums. How can we create a system of mutual benefits, and are there pathways for new career types, such as shared curatorships? We also reflected on the need to undo the idea that objects represent people. Rather they are moments in time that mean different things to different people. The project can make space for these different people to share their narratives. The meaning of objects would not exist without communities. Without people, none of this can exist.

### **The Realities of Travelling Objects and People**

Legacies of empire live on in practicalities. For example, when I organised the launch event of the 100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object website, I noticed that flight routes are legacies of empire. Almost all participants had to fly via the imperial metropolis, London, to travel on to Jamaica where some of them also needed visa, which again, reflects colonial power structures.

Earlier this year, Germany rejected the visa of colleagues from Cameroon.<sup>20</sup> There was an outrage on social media, not least because the

scholars were supposed to help European museums ‘decolonize’ their collection – the irony could not be more obvious. This example is pertinent because of the stark discrepancy between the apparent willingness to repatriate objects and the willingness to accept migrating people, who are repatriated in abundance at the margins of the European Union. In other words, legacies of colonialism, including visa rejections or the lack of reliable internet access, became a practical hindrance in the workshop planning itself.

Many countries frequently reject the visa of scholars from the African continent who want to attend conferences elsewhere; not only during the pandemic. Diversifying is a challenging task and requires listening, empathy, patience, and stamina. It also relies on the support of those with privilege and power and on funding bodies and institutions who recognize the urgent need to decentralize and shift power structures in research and curating, in particular in the name of ‘decolonizing the museum’.

As institutional barriers persist and many excluded voices are still not being heard, the question arises of how successfully the project will plug into the museum landscape, public discourse, and mainstream media as a counternarrative to McGregor’s own project. A different way of asking this question is: how willing are institutions to put more care into people, rather than objects, to move beyond pure ‘object fetishism’ and the Western preservation paradigm? As many objects are migrating back in the near future, the real question is how many people will be allowed to migrate in as this process is underway. The cartoons by the Egyptian artist Nasser and Heba Abd El Gawad puts the finger on the problem. When Heba (who is one of the cartoon characters) asked her friend why he dressed up as a mummy, he answers that this way he might perhaps be able to travel to Europe more easily.<sup>24</sup>



**Fig. 6.** Comic by Nasser Junior.

Translation:

(a) Heba: Did you know that British-led excavations have discovered thousands of artefacts in Egypt and exported some of them to 27 countries?

(b) Heba: What are you doing?!

(c) Nasser: Tell them you discovered a mummy who wants to travel

In: Heba Abd El Gawad and Alice Stevenson 2021 (Figure 1).

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# “We are Tupinambá and We Want the Cloak Back”: Indigenous Restitution Claims at the *Mostra do Redescobrimento* (Sao Paulo, 2000)

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## **ABSTRACT**

The turn of the millennium in 2000 marked the quincentenary of the Portuguese “discovery” of Brazil and catalyzed a broad re-evaluation of the nation’s colonial past and its canonical historical narratives. A monumental exhibition entitled *Mostra do Redescobrimento* (Rediscovery Show) marked the occasion from April to September 2000 at the Ibirapuera Park (São Paulo). The curatorial principle of its artistic director, Nelson Aguilar, divided the exhibition into twelve thematic sections dedicated to indigenous, black, popular, and modern art, among others, capturing the concept of the *Museu das Origens* idealized by Mario Pedrosa, after a fire at the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, in 1978.

This paper examines the display of a 17th-century Tupinambá feather cloak, part of the collections of the National Museum of Denmark (Nationalmuseet i København), within the Indigenous Arts section of the *Mostra do Redescobrimento*, investigating its reception among local communities and the ensuing restitution claims by the Tupinamba from Olivença, Bahia. The discourse extends to situate these claims within a restitution agenda that gained momentum in the early 2000s, and to dissect the political implications of these claims within debates and practices surrounding museum collections.

## **KEYWORDS**

Indigenous Art; Cultural Restitution; Brazilian Art History; Exhibition Histories.

The emblematic date of April 22, 2000, marked 500 years of the so-called “discovery” of Brazil by the Portuguese, igniting a broad debate surrounding the term to which the celebrations were dedicated. Within this context, discussions regarding the echoes of Brazil's colonial past, the struggle of indigenous people for land demarcation, and the narratives around the place of these communities in national history were, as they are today, at their heyday.

To commemorate this date, a massive exhibition was organized in São Paulo from April to September 2000. The exhibition occupied an area of 60 thousand square meters within the complex of buildings designed by architect Oscar Niemeyer at the Ibirapuera Park (Sao Paulo). Curated by Nelson Aguilar, the show was titled *Mostra do Redescobrimento (The Rediscovery Show)*, and was organized into twelve sections, each structured around themes like *The First Discovery of America, Indigenous Arts, Letter from Pero Vaz de Caminha, Baroque Art, Afro-Brazilian Art, Black in Body and Soul, Popular Art, 19th Century Art, Modern Art, Images of the Unconscious, Contemporary Art* and *The Distant Gaze*.

The preparatory phase for the *Mostra* commenced in January 1997, with the intent to align with what curator and critic Mário Pedrosa had envisioned for a *Museum of Origins*. This museum concept, which never materialized, emerged following a fire that consumed the collections of the Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art in 1978. The central concept in Pedrosa's museum project was the idea of exploring the notion of “origin” around four central axes: indigenous, black, popular, and modern arts. “In itself, such a project would represent the utopia of a culturally ‘updated’ country in permanent dialogue with its roots, which, in the long run, would publicly consolidate an autonomous tradition”, explained art historian Taísa Palhares<sup>4</sup>.

For the *Mostra do Redescobrimento*, Nelson Aguilar envisaged a more comprehensive thematic coverage. For instance, he considered that Pedrosa's project overlooked archaeology. Amidst the preparation of the *Mostra*, elucidated Aguilar, “the oldest skeleton in the Americas, Luzia, was unveiled, prompting a reconfiguration of the project to encompass the significance of

this discovery in human evolution, the dawn of humanity, and the human settlement in the Americas”<sup>2</sup>. Aguilár also discerned the musealization of a purported Brazilian origin to be problematic, particularly when correlating Indigenous contemporary creations to a remote and “primitive” past. He asserted that “putting the indigenous in the museum is akin to stating that they no longer exist.”<sup>3</sup>

To address these issues, Aguilár enlisted the expertise of Lucia Hussak Van Velthem, anthropologist and then director of Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, and José Antônio Fernandes Dias Braga, professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Universities of Coimbra and Lisbon, to curate the Indigenous Arts section. Located in the Oca (Ibirapuera Park, São Paulo), alongside the archaeology module, the exhibit aimed to highlight the diversity and contemporaneity of indigenous culture, while fostering methodological dialogues with the realm of anthropology. In an endeavor as broad and encompassing as the *Mostra do Redescobrimento* itself, the curation included about 500 pieces from private collections and European and Brazilian museums, produced by over 100 different communities, spanning a period of five centuries, from 1500 to 2000.

Aiming to move beyond the “established models of ethnographic exhibitions, where objects are showcased by ethnic groups or organized by morphological-functional criteria”<sup>4</sup>, the exhibit was structured around two cross-cutting axes: “What constitutes art in indigenous societies? (*O que pode ser arte nas sociedades indígenas*)” and “Artistic objects, activities, and effects (*Objetos artísticos, atividades e efeitos*)”. The first axis underscored the equivalence between indigenous artifacts and works of art, their original usage and cult values, as well as their relationship to a Western art perspective, subdivided into two streams: *Hybridizations* and *Imakhé<sup>5</sup> Objects*. Broadly, it aimed to detach the artistic nature of the objects from a purely functional aspect. Items such as bowls, masks, musical instruments, hunting gear, and scarifiers shared space with multimedia productions like videos or installations by Indigenous artists. Its “cenographic project”, as were called most of the display projects at the *Mostra*, was conceived by Paulo Pederneiras and Vera Hamburguer (Fig. 1 and 2).



**Fig. 1 and 2:** Indigenous art module at the Mostra do Redescobrimento, 2000. Cenographic project by Paulo Pederneiras and Vera Hamburger. Installation shot.

One of the core arguments propelling the show was the idea to reaffirm the contemporaneity and diversity of indigenous arts which, as per Van Velthen, should no longer be viewed as remnants of a “lost paradise”<sup>6</sup>.

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In light of this context, it is relevant to juxtapose the curatorial approaches of *Mostra do Redescobrimento* (2000) with those of the 1980s, a period marked by tentative efforts to explore alternative forms of displaying Indigenous art.

During that decade, several exhibitions attempted to bridge the dialogue between indigenous production and the modern and contemporary art field. Notable examples include *Arte Plumária do Brasil* (1980) organized by Norberto Nicola at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo; a similarly titled exhibit curated by historian Ulpiano Bezerra de Menezes for the 17th Bienal de São Paulo (1983); and *Tradição e Ruptura - Síntese da Arte e Cultura Brasileira* (1984-85), presented by the Fundação Bienal.

Within this frame of reference, Ulpiano Bezerra de Menezes and anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro explored the nuances of indigenous arts in the book *História Geral da Arte no Brasil*, edited by curator Walter Zanini (1983). While Menezes spotlighted the fallacies of theories attempting to trace Western art attributes in “native” productions, Ribeiro delineated the intersections between the practical and the aesthetic values inherent in Indigenous arts.

Three decades earlier, precisely in 1953, Darcy Ribeiro founded the Museu do Índio in Rio de Janeiro. His vision diverged from classical ethnology—which perceived “primitive peoples simply as fossils of the human race”<sup>7</sup>—and the natural sciences. In his article, *The Museum of the Indian*, published in *Museum* magazine, edited by UNESCO in 1955, Ribeiro elucidated the objectives underpinning the institution’s creation. He criticized traditional ethnology museums for presenting communities as exotic entities; where visitors were exposed to myths of headhunters, cannibals, and self-mutilation practices, evoking terror and perplexity, but

seldom an empathy or appreciation for the artistic creations of the cultures on display.



**Fig. 3.** Catalog of *Arte Plumária do Brasil* (1980), Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo.

Despite the resonances and critiques surrounding Ribeiro's museological project, the effort to provide an exhibition framework for indigenous productions grounded in contextual narratives resonates with the ideas of Pedrosa and Aguilar, thereby influencing the narrative adopted by the curators of the Indigenous Arts module.

These longstanding inquiries echo the critique directed at the traditional museum display paradigm and the "ways of seeing" as described

by Svetlana Alpers<sup>8</sup>. In her discussion, Alpers alludes to the transformative effect that museums have on objects when they are isolated from their original or functional contexts, and placed within the institutional setting for a contemplative gaze. This act not only alters the object's relational dynamic but also categorizes it within the realm of 'art' akin to the aesthetic and cultural paradigms familiar to the viewer. The act of seeing, thus, becomes a culturally loaded act that is mediated by institutional, historical, and aesthetic frameworks defining not just what is seen, but how things are seen and understood.

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At the *Mostra do Redescobrimento*, the display of a distinctive piece poses further questions to the exhibition histories commented on here, while bearing on the broader re-evaluation of the 2000 commemorations. This piece is the 17th-century Tupinambá feather cloak, initially taken from Brazil to the Netherlands by Maurício de Nassau in 1664. It was later gifted to the King of Denmark's cabinet of curiosities before eventually becoming part of the National Museum of Denmark (Nationalmuseet i København) collection in Copenhagen. Art historian Amy Bueno, in her work "Historicity, Achronicity, and the Materiality of Cultures in Colonial Brazil" (2015), delves into the remarkable transatlantic trajectory of the feather cloak. She underscores the multiplicity of agencies, temporalities, and narratives that prompt an ongoing reevaluation of the semantic layers embodied by this piece.

In the early modern period, however, Tupi feathered capes and crowns were among the most familiar New World artifacts; they were so crucial to the conceptualization of the Americas in early modern European scientific and religious contexts that the historian William Sturtevant referred to the development as the "Tupinambization" of the Atlantic world. These objects also remain crucial touchstones of Brazilian national and indigenous identity today.<sup>9</sup>

A striking instance of a process of contemporary resemanticization occurred precisely during the *Mostra* when the Tupinambá from Olivença (Bahia) came to visit the show, at the invitation of a popular local media outlet, the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. Despite the sensationalist angle of its journalistic coverage, this initiative provided a platform for the Indigenous group to engage in discussions surrounding their ethnic identity tied to Tupinambá ancestry—a part of an identification process that had been unfolding for decades. The visit culminated in the request for the restitution of the cloak. “We are undergoing a [...] cultural revival [*resgate cultural*]. Recovering the cloak brings the memory of our ancestors closer,” said educator Núbia Batista da Silva to the *Folha de São Paulo* following her visit to the exhibition. The newspaper also captured the poignant experience of two other community leaders upon encountering the ancestral featherwork:

As they approached the Tupinambá cloak, Nivalda Amaral de Jesus and Aloísio Cunha Silva were moved to tears. They remained silent for an extended period. “It was remorse I felt,” attempted to articulate Dona Nivalda. “I heard a voice, the origin of which I can't discern, telling me: 'This is the one. There's no other. The entire history of our people is here.’” Aloísio was astounded by the design of this artifact. “We can't recreate anything like this, a garment that drapes down the back. Now I understand: when the colonizers appropriated the cloak, they seized our power and, weakened, we lost everything.”<sup>10</sup>

Aloísio's utterance epitomizes how the cloak symbolizes the usurped vigor that the process of identity formation seeks to reclaim. Hence, its ramifications extend to the legal recognition of lands and rights, intersecting with indigenist policies in place during the 2000s. The demand also rekindled discussions around colonial histories, repatriation of cultural heritage, and the agency of indigenous peoples in curating and interpreting their own historical narratives. This scenario not only highlights the living histories and present-day implications of colonial-era artifacts but also underscores the potential of exhibitions like the *Mostra do Redescobrimento* in fostering a

discursive space where contemporary indigenous voices can converge, interact, and challenge traditional narratives.



**Fig. 4.** Nivalda Amaral de Jesus and Aloísio Cunha Silva observe the Tupinambá cloak. Photo: Flávio Florido - May 21, 2000/Folhapress

“Although it is a somewhat eccentric claim, this was wonderful, since the cloak belongs to the Royal Museum of Denmark, a gift from Prince Maurice of Nassau to his brother. If not for the European collections that have preserved these objects over all these years, we would have nothing, as the tropical organic chemistry is very harsh”, expressed Nelson Aguilar at the time<sup>4</sup>.

It is clear that the focal point of concern is not merely the preservation capabilities of the Danish Museum or the virtues of the Nordic climate in retaining the artifact, as noted by Aguilar's remarks. Within the broader discourse surrounding the restitution of historical and ethnographic objects taken during the colonial era, it's crucial to recognize how the claim intersects with significant debates regarding the land demarcation campaigns undertaken by the Tupinambá from Olivença, as well as the politics of memory encompassing the official commemorations of the “500 years of Brazil.”

Inhabiting the Atlantic Forest region of southern Bahia, the Tupinambá of Olivença have a history steeped in disputes and ambivalence

toward their indigenous identity. Although they occupied the region before the arrival of the first European fleets, they were confined by landowners who, from the end of the 19th century, seized large areas for cocoa cultivation, converting them into pastures or monocultures. Presently, the prevailing attitude among the conservative authorities regarding their identity is still tainted by substantial distrust, perpetuated by the myth that they are no longer pure Indigenous<sup>12</sup>. Notably, in the 2000s, they embarked on a struggle that challenged stereotypical narratives and worked to reaffirm their cultural heritage and rights.

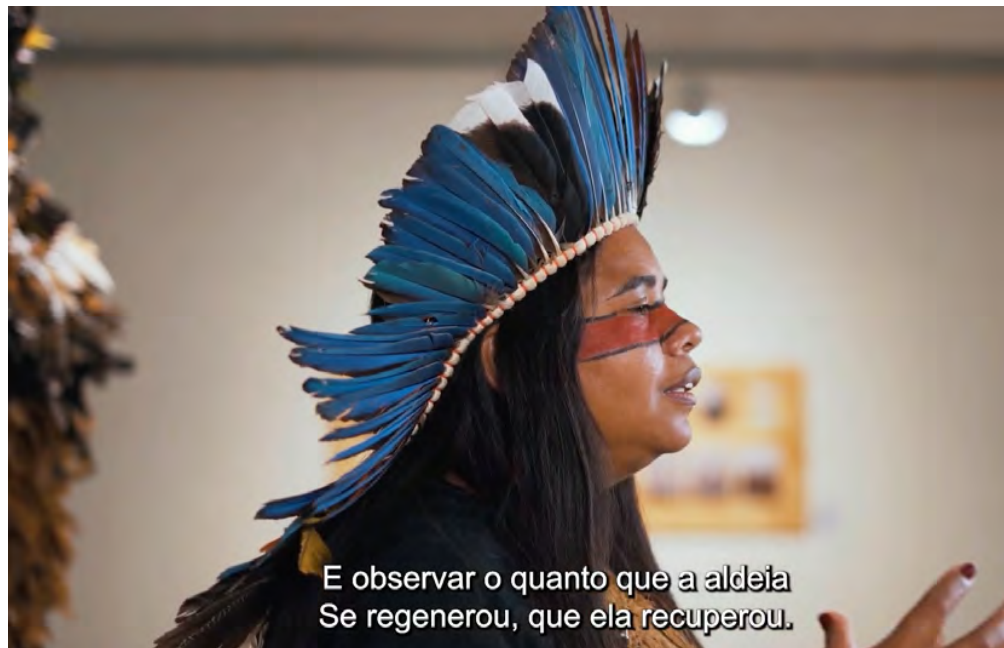
In his work, *Etnogênese Indígenas*, anthropologist José Mauricio Arruti (2005) delves into the concept of ethnogenesis, urging to understand the social dynamics that enable a specific group to establish identities. He advocates for examining the motivations, pathways, and mechanisms that assist a group in forming its communal bonds, whether by championing the acknowledgment of their unique characteristics in an environment of indifference, or by establishing clear boundaries where only continuity and homogeneity were assumed previously. From this viewpoint, the reclamation of the 17th-century feather cloak displayed at the *Mostra* stands as a potent symbolic gesture and a crucial testimony to a narrative that contributes to the nurturing of communal identity among the Olivença group.

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It is important to note that, at the *Mostra do Redescobrimento*, references to the notable mantle were also visible in the Contemporary Art module, especially in the works of non-indigenous Brazilian artists like Lygia Pape. Pape displayed a series of works dedicated to the piece, made between 1996 and 2000. Her creations, which varied from spheres adorned with guará feathers to red smoke surrounding Guanabara Bay, are evidence of how indigenous references have been incorporated into Brazilian art.

Earlier, in the late 1970s, Pape, along with Mario Pedrosa and a cohort of anthropologists and archaeologists, had planned an exhibition titled *Alegria de Viver, Alegria de Criar* (Joy of Living, Joy of Creating). This

exhibition, intended for 1979 at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, was to feature a range of indigenous pieces, including the Tupirumbá cloak. However, it was halted due to the 1978 fire.



**Fig. 5.** Glicéria Tupinambá talks about the process of reproducing the feather garment techniques in the context of the exhibition *Essa é a grande volta do manto tupinambá*, 2021.

Now, over two decades later, the significance of these experiences has only amplified. A notable example is the exhibit *Essa é a grande volta do manto tupinambá*, displayed at Funarte Brasília and Casa da Lenha, in Porto Seguro, in 2021. Curated by Augustin de Tugny, Glicéria Tupinambá, Juliana Caffé, and Juliana Gontijo, the exhibition revolved around the history and revival of the Tupinambá feather works' creation modes.

The exhibit featured three cloaks fashioned by Glicéria Tupinambá in 2021, along with artworks by Edimilson de Almeida Pereira, Fernanda Liberti, Gustavo Caboco, Livia Melzi, Rogério Sganzerla, and Sophia Pinheiro. Glicéria, an artist, teacher and leading political figure from the Serra do Padeiro community in Olivença explained that the Tupinambá mantle is “a revered

attire for our people. It, therefore, personifies a character, embodies vitality, is a divine gift from heaven to earth, and is adorned by the pajés and the majés. It serves as an instrument, a sacred garment”<sup>13</sup>. Equally important to her were the contributions of Nivalda Amaral de Jesus, who passed away in 2018. As we have read before, she was part of the group that traveled to São Paulo, in 2000, to see the Tupinambá feather cloak. “She returned to the village with this renewed spirit and sparked this awakening of the Tupinambá people,” Glicéria recounted<sup>14</sup>.

More recently, Glicéria played a symbolic role in the negotiations that culminated in the official announcement of a "donation" of the artifact by the Danish Nationalmuseet to the Brazilian Museu Nacional (Rio de Janeiro)<sup>15</sup>. Shortly before the submission of this article for final publication in July 2023, a feature by journalist Elisangela Roxo was published in the local media. In it, Roxo detailed Glicéria's involvement in a workshop held in September 2022 at the Nationalmuseet, titled *Different Pasts – Sustainable Futures*. This event, occurring nearly a year before the mantle's repatriation disclosure, deliberated on the evolving narratives and collaborative prospects within ethnographic museums. Roxo vividly described the moment when Glicéria engaged the audience, drawing parallels to the restitution claims made during the *Mostra do Redescobrimento*:

Glicéria wore a headdress of blue macaw feathers and a yellow dress. She spoke in Portuguese, with simultaneous translation into English and Danish. On her left, the mantle that will be returned rested upright, inside a glass case. “In the year 2000, the piece in this room visited us in Brazil and was recognized by Valdelice Tupinambá’s mother, Dona Nivalda. This meeting helped our struggle, it helped people to know that we never left our territory. We have lived there traditionally until now. Today, I find myself here by the call of the mantle. The link between the past and the present is not broken. The threads of the mantle brought me to Denmark and made it possible for us to be together in this moment.”<sup>16</sup>

While Glicéria's narrative rekindles the spiritual connection of the Olivença with the mantle, tracing back to their encounter with the piece in

the 2000s, new dialogues are emerging within academic, political, and diplomatic circles. Here, it's crucial to note that, beyond the celebratory initiatives this return may evoke, a critical outlook toward the political instrumentalization of this process is paramount. In this light, several questions surface concerning the research agendas and the preservation policies and collection formation that will be embraced following (and beyond) the restitution of the item in question. As the feather cloak makes its journey to the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, it extends an invitation for creating a conducive environment for the stewardship and contextualization of such artifacts, ensuring they resonate meaningfully within new museological practices for the future.

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### Endnotes

1. Palhares, p. 10, 2006.
2. Aguilar, n.p., 2001.
3. Idem.
4. Grupioni, p. 75, 2000.
5. *Imakhé* is a Wayana term denoting “what is (intrinsically) mine,” translated into Portuguese by the indigenous people themselves as “enfeite” (ornament) (Van Velthen, 2010, p. 149)
6. Van Velthen, p. 59, 2000.
7. Ribeiro, p. 5, 1955.
8. Alpers, p. 27, 1991
9. Buono, p. 21, 2015
10. Antenore, p. E1, 2000.
11. Aguilar, n.p., 2001.
12. “Tupinambá de Olivença - Povos Indígenas No Brasil.” Instituto Socioambiental. [https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Tupinamb%C3%A1\\_de\\_Oliven%C3%A7a](https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Tupinamb%C3%A1_de_Oliven%C3%A7a).
13. Depoimento de Glicéria Tupinambá, Oct 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eB-2MBYQjY>
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15. Cardoso, n.p., 2023.
16. Roxo, n.p. 2023.

# Guns and Wealth: The Curious Return of Colonial Collections to China

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## **ABSTRACT**

At the turn of the last millennium, China began to culturally reprocess its “century of humiliation” and joined the heated debate over the repatriation of important collections. Initiated by a survey on the distributed Dunhuang manuscripts and raised by the Sino-French argument over the auction sales of a bronze zodiac animal head (looted from the old Summer Palace during the Second Opium War), China's demand for returning its “national treasures” was made official at the UN General Assembly in New York in 2009. Instead of resorting to the UNESCO heritage charters, conventions or laws, “buying back” seemed to be the only method viable to recover such objects. However, unlike Greece or Egypt, China did receive the returns of “war booty” after the two world wars. At the same time, the country has a history of applying a museum diplomacy to solicit military or financial assistance from the West. According to this Chinese experience, the restitution of colonial collections can only be a result of hard power struggle. Today, these collections termed “world cultures” have become an important diplomatic token, and returning them (physically or digitally) a tactic for the countries of “universal museums” to devise a foreign policy for the making of important agreements of trade or investment with the “countries of origin.”

## **KEYWORDS**

Repatriation; Colonial Collection; Universal Museum; Decolonization; Art Market; Museum Diplomacy; Sino-Western Relations; Victor Hugo.

### **Introduction**

Statute of limitations and utilitarian perspective of moral judgment are the two most often used reasonings for declining the demand for returning the cultural heritage of the Other acquired during colonization. A historical study of the Chinese experience in retrieving its national treasures lost to the West in the New Imperialism era will shed some light on the hard facts of “who owns the past”.

Long before these rationales took the ground, it had been made explicit that the colonial collections resulting from “crime” should be returned to their original countries.

One of the most known documents of such an opinion is a letter written by the French writer Victor Hugo to the (Irish) British captain William Butler. Dated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November in 1861, the letter commented on the sack of China’s imperial gardens (the old Summer Palace or Yuanming Yuan of the Qing court) in Pékin (Beijing) by the British and the French troops during the Anglo-French Expedition to China (or the Second Opium War in Chinese) in 1860 (Hugo 1861).

The devastation of the Summer Palace was accomplished by the two victors acting jointly. Mixed up in all this is the name of Elgin, which inevitably calls to mind the Parthenon. What was done to the Parthenon was done to the Summer Palace, more thoroughly and better, so that nothing of it should be left. All the treasures of all our cathedrals put together could not equal this formidable and splendid museum of the Orient. It contained not only masterpieces of art, but masses of jewelry. What a great exploit, what a windfall! One of the two victors filled his pockets; when the other saw this he filled his coffers. And back they came to Europe, arm in arm, laughing away. Such is the story of the two bandits. We Europeans are the civilized ones, and for us the Chinese are the barbarians. This is what civilization has done to barbarism. Before history, one of the two bandits will be called France; the other will be called England. But I protest, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity! the crimes of those who lead are not the fault of those who are led; Governments are sometimes bandits, peoples never. The French empire has pocketed half

of this victory, and today with a kind of proprietorial naivety it displays the splendid bric-a-brac of the Summer Palace. I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will **return this booty** to despoiled China.

As shown in the letter, Hugo alleged the French and the British governments the bandits who thieved in the Chinese, although the former regarded themselves as “the civilized” and the latter “the barbarians.” “Hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China”, said Hugo.

Unfortunately, the appeal of Hugo had been dismissed by his government and the like for more than 150 years until when the French President Emmanuel Macron sparked hope for the countries of origin in the rest of the world with a public speech at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November in 2017. “Starting today, and within the next five years, I want to see the conditions put in place so as to allow for the temporary or definitive restitution of African cultural heritage to Africa”, said Macron (Harris 2018). However, with a new “relational ethics” – meaning a decision-making model that outlines mutual respect, relational engagement, bringing knowledge back to life, and creating environment (Putman 1991) – the Savoy-Sarr Report, in the attempt to follow suit the idea of Macron, was severely criticized by the French museum and heritage professionals and ended with little achievement (Noce 2022).

### **Restitution: An Intereuropean convention becoming global**

One might think that it was still “barbaric” at the time of Hugo regarding the protection of cultural heritage or the restitution of art spoils or war booties. However, the fact is that the European countries were rather “civilized” towards each other. Already half a century prior to Hugo writing his letter, to return the cultural heritage of the Other taken during the war had been well established and practiced in Europe. For instance, in 1815, after the Napoleonic wars, in seeking a new power balance among European countries like Austria, Great Britain, Prussia and Russia, the Treaty of Paris was signed at the Congress of Vienna. More than redefining the borderlines of these

countries, the Treaty mandated the repatriation of France' art spoils to their provenances. Nearly 5,000 artworks, historical artifacts and archaeological finds were returned to their countries of origins – within Europe (Eustace 2015).

In the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, rather than fighting against each other these leading European powers concentrated on expanding their overseas colonies as in Africa or Asia. As a consequence, colossal amounts of war plunders from the colonized countries were shipped back to the metropolises, as seen in Paris, London or Berlin, where “national museums” – now “universal museums” or “encyclopedia museums” (Schuster 2004) – were constructed one after the other to host, safeguard and display these prestigious heritage artifacts of the Other. By doing so, these museums became “the public archive of the colonial system” (CCP 2019). The “crime” that Hugo criticized apparently was but one of the innumerable many the colonial governments committed to the “countries of origin” outside Europe in the rest of the world, where the cultural systems and social traditions were genuinely heterogenic to the West.

After this museum boom in Europe, in 1907, a heritage convention was created to follow and extend the idea of the Treaty of Paris in 1815 about the restitution of art loots – the Hague Convention. It suggested that “in sieges and bombardments, all available precautions must be adopted to spare buildings devoted to divine worship, art, education, or social welfare, historical monuments.” However, WWI still saw as many as before the plunders and spoils of artworks, historic buildings, and monuments. Again, in 1919, the Treaty of Versailles mandated Germany to return its war booties to their provenance. For example, the much-appreciated Altarpiece by Van Eyck, created in 1432, was given back to Ghent in Belgium.

It is worth noting that such conduct was defined or interpreted as “punishment” by the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Does it mean that it should be legitimate to keep the art spoils or war booties as such for the winning parties of the war? The answer seems positive as we saw that, for example, after WWII, the Russian art spoils were not mandated to return (to Germany), but the German ones were. Viewing the unprecedented scale of

such detriments, after WWII, in 1954, a second Hague Convention was established for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (targeting movable art treasures and immovable historical monuments).

To enlarge the scope of heritage protection from wartime to peacetime, the following Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was created in 1970. The goal was to prohibit illegal excavation and dealing of heritage artifacts on a global scale. And this has become the foundation for the judgment of most restitution cases today in terms of cultural heritage. In this line of thought, the UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects was established in 1995 – which has remained to this day the only legal instrument for the countries of origin to recover their lost cultural properties.

A brief review as such on the development of international heritage charters, conventions and laws makes it clear that the protection or restitution of cultural heritage was originally an Intereuropean affair. It became global only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when most of the former colonies or semi-colonies became independent. More importantly, none of these conventions or laws should apply to the colonial collections expropriated from the countries of origin during colonization.

### **Between the West and the rest (China)**

As indicated above, the return of art spoils to their countries of origin outside of Europe is a postcolonial question. It is not until the end of the 1970s that the very first appeal of the sort from the non-Western countries was heard in the international forum.

In 1978, the “plea for the return of irreplaceable cultural heritage to those who created it” was made by the first African Director-General of UNESCO (a Sorbonne graduate who served France during WWII) (M’Bow 1978). Following this plea, an intergovernmental committee was created by UNESCO for promoting the return of cultural property to its countries of origin or its restitution in case of illicit appropriation. By far, twenty-two

member states of UNESCO were elected for the committee, excluding the former colonial powers like Britain or France.

China has not been in the committee either, being a semi-colonized country from 1840 to 1997 (when Hong Kong and Macau were given back from Britain and Portugal). The Chinese call for returning its national treasures lost to the West in the Age of New Imperialism only emerged with public enthusiasm after the turn of the last millennium (although the idea was firstly discussed in the 1970s). This time, the call was initiated because of the Dunhuang manuscripts, the medieval encyclopedia of Central Asia, discovered by the Western explorers in the late of 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, like the British archaeologist Marc Aurel Stein and the French sinologist Paul Pelliot, from the Silk Roads in the province of Xinjiang (or Chinese Turkestan). The manuscripts were quickly taken from the provenance and distributed to dozens of museums, libraries or archives around the world. In 1996, a fieldwork was carried out by a Chinese historian from the Pékin University to investigate the whereabouts of the Dunhuang manuscripts abroad. In 1998, at a Dunhuang Academy meeting to prepare Dunhuang Centenary, the call for the return of the lost manuscripts from overseas was discussed (Rong 1998). In 2000, via Chinese Central Television, the director of the Dunhuang Academy, Fan Jinshi, publicly expressed her wish “to see the restitution of the Dunhuang manuscripts one day.” To this end, in 2001, the National Fund for Protecting Important Cultural Artefacts was established under the Ministry of Culture in China – consisting of private donation (an initial amount was RMB 50,000,000) and an annual subsidy coming from the government. In 2002, the “rules on using this specific funding to purchase nationally important cultural relics” was issued by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage.

It was also the time when the British Museum published the declaration of “universal museums,” which was signed by eighteen directors from the major art museums of West Europe and North America (DW 2003) in response to the demand of the Greek government for the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles (“The Official Greek Position” 2004). This internationally renowned dispute also triggered an angry reaction from Chinese historians

and cultural experts, who then wrote a “public letter” on the Chinese press and media to protest in 2003.

### **China buying back national treasures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In fact, the attitude of the Chinese government toward the restitution of colonial collections had remained unclear. It is not until 2009, such a demand was made official by the government. The near cause was a Sino-French legal argument over a Christie’s auction in Paris for a bronze zodiac animal head – looted from the old Summer Palace during the Second Opium War by the Franco-British troops, as criticized by Hugo in the letter quoted above.

The story about the recent ownership over these bronze zodiac animal heads (a set of twelve in total originally) can be traced back to the 1980s – when China just reconnected to the world with its opening-up policy and Taiwan enjoyed a thriving economy being one of the Four Asian Tigers. In 1987, a private collector from Taiwan found at Sotheby’s New York one of the bronze animal heads and purchased it for USD 130,000. In 1989, the same collector bought another three (bull, tiger, and horse) from Sotheby’s London – with the horse alone costing USD 250,000. In 2000, he released these three pieces to the market.

The Poly Art Museum in Beijing bought the tiger from Sotheby’s Hong Kong with HKD 14,000,000 (USD 1,783 474) as well as the horse and the bull from Christie’s Hong Kong with HKD 7,400,000 (USD 942,693) and HKD 7,000,000 (USD 891,737). The fore mentioned National Fund for Protecting Important Cultural Artefacts has sponsored these acquisitions without details revealed. In 2003, a donation of RMB 6,000,000 was made to the Fund by the Hong Kong-based millionaire Stanley Ho for the Poly Museum to acquire the bronze head of pig from the United States. And it was also him who bought the horse head in 2007 from Sotheby’s Hong Kong and donated it directly back to the heritage site museum of Summer Palace in Beijing in 2019.

The legal argument in Paris in 2009 mentioned above was about the other two bronze zodiac animal heads, the mouse and the rabbit, released by the French collector Pierre Bergé, the co-founder of the fashion label Yves Saint Laurent. The auction at Christie’s was concluded by a Chinese

businessman, who eventually refused to complete the deal afterward saying that “they were looted and illegally exported from China”. The Chinese brought a lawsuit to the court in Paris without success. However, the argument ended up with another French fashion tycoon Francois Pinault – who had a big share of luxury goods market in China – buying the two heads and donated them to the National Museum of China in Beijing.

It is worth noting that, coinciding with this French donation in 2009, the demand for returning the national treasures lost to the West in the Age of New Imperialism was made official by the Chinese government through the Chinese ambassador Liu Zhenming at the 64<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly in New York.

#### **Museum diplomacy from the West to the rising China**

The good publicity of “returning” national treasures back to China as such does not go unnoticed. Around the same period in the 2000s, among all these disputes over the ownership of colonial collections, universal museums were observed to play a diplomatic role in conversations with emerging economies outside of Europe, like China.

In 2006, to refuse the Greek appeal for the return of the Parthenon Marbles and to attest the “importance of universal museums” as declared, the British Museum for the very first time in its 250 years of existence organized a tour exhibition for its colonial collections to go outside of the museum door and outside of the country, to Beijing and Shanghai (Boyd and MacGregor 2006). The exhibition comprised a total of 272 prestigious artworks and historical artifacts (including a copy of the Rosetta stone) of “world cultures”, ranging from the Middle East to Africa and Asia. Curiously, none of them was originated from China, one of the biggest “source country”. Perhaps it was out of precaution, as the question of repatriation was asked by local Chinese journalists at every single press conference held for the show in China.

One important fact which was not disclosed on the same page together with the exhibition news is what happened under the stage. A year ago, in 2005, when the exhibition contract was to be signed, also came to Beijing together with the British Museum’s director Neil McGregor was the

British prime minister, Tony Blair. While the former concluded the contract for the temporary tour exhibition, the latter some other deals with substantial benefits. Immediately after the show, we saw that China's foreign direct investment in the UK increased dramatically – from USD 35 million in 2006 to USD 500 millions in 2007.

### **China received art loots from Germany after WWI and Japan WWII**

In retrospect, there was another way other than buying to retrieve its lost national treasures that became the colonial collections of the colonial powers. Compared to Greece, Egypt or any other former colonies or semi-colonies in the rest of the world, China was an exception regarding the repatriation matter.

After the 1911 Revolution when the Republic of China was established, a large portion of the Chinese territory remained controlled by colonial countries like Russia, Germany, Britain, France and Japan. As WWI extended to the European colonies overseas (including part of China), the Chinese government took side with the Allied Powers and joined the war by sending the labor force to the battlefield of Europe. Consequently, when the Treaty of Versailles mandated the return of Germany's war booties back to their original countries, China was included. Under such circumstances, the semi-colonized China has received the return of its "national treasures" that became the colonial collections of the West. The return was half of the "astronomical observatory," created in 1442 and installed ever since on the corner of Pékin City Wall. (The other half was at the hands of the French.) Just like the bronze zodiac animal heads looted from the Summer Palace during the Second Opium War, these astronomical instruments were plundered by the Franco-German troops under the command of the German Allied Supreme Commander Alfred Count von Waldersee during the Eight Nations Allies (a military coalition that fought in Beijing) in 1900. Right after the loot, the German booty was shipped back to Germany under the mandate of the German Emperor Wilhelm II, for his own Summer Palace in Potsdam.

A similar case happened to China after WWII. This time it was with Japan and when China ended the war being one of the Big Five together with

the United States, the UK, the USSR and France. However, due to the interference of the United States and the negligence of the Far Eastern Advisory Commission (which later became the Far East Commission in Washington), only about five per cent of the cultural objects plundered by the Japanese Empire (between 1931 and 1945) were handed over to the Chinese government.

### **A Chinese museum diplomacy to the West in crisis**

Considering that the West much wanted the archaeological finds and historical artefacts, China began to formulate a museum diplomacy in the 1930s to solicit military and financial supports from the leading world powers in the West to fight against the Japanese Empire, which began to invade Manchuria on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September in 1931. In 1932, Sir Percival David, one of the most prominent collectors of Chinese art and antiques at that time, proposed an exhibition plan for Chinese art for the Royal Art Academy in London. The idea was conveyed by the aforementioned French sinologist Paul Pelliot to the Chinese government, to which Pelliot had maintained a good relationship due to close collaborations on the studies of Dunhuang manuscripts. The Chinese government took it as an opportunity to win over the heart of the European public for supporting China in the war with Japan. As a result, the British warship H.M.S. Suffolk was sent, not to fight Japan, but to escort these “national treasures” of China from Shanghai to London for the exhibition. In 1935, a total of 93 boxes full of “treasures from China” arrived at Portsmouth, including 1,022 items of bronze, ceramics, and paintings.

The exhibition received a grand success. Out of envy, the museum directors from the United States, Russia and even Japan have proposed to host the tour exhibition in the following years in their own countries. Due to the intricate domestic politics and foreign policy of China at that time caused by the conflicts between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, the proposal of the United States – made by Herbert Eustis Winlock, the curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was turned down. The proposal of Russia was accepted. Therefore in 1940 these national treasures

were again sent for a tour to Moscow in exchange of financial and military assistances.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such a museum diplomacy was continued by both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) under the rules of Mao Zedong and Jiang Kai-shek. In the 1950s, the former sent a series of Dunhuang art exhibitions to Southeast Asia and East Europe, including Burma, India, Czech Slovakia and Poland, as well as Japan. In 1961, the Republic of China sent its national treasures (removed from the mainland to Taiwan after 1949) for a tour exhibition in the United States.

After the Cold War, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such a practice was picked up again by the government in Taiwan led by the Independence Party. The purpose was to seek supports from the West vis-à-vis the threat of China from across the strait. As a result, several special exhibitions were organized by the National Palace Museum in Taipei for a tour show to the United States, Japan, France and Germany.

#### **Repatriation: A matter of war**

According to the Chinese experience recounted above, the prospect for the countries of origin to retrieve their cultural heritage expropriated to the West during colonization does not appear to be very optimistic. As it seems to suggest that the matter can only be resolved through the combat of hard power. By far, the countries of origin (the former colonies or semi-colonies in Africa or Asia) often stressed on the concept of "cultural identity" or "national dignity", and the universal museums (in West Europe or North America) the idea of "enlightenment spirit" or the fact that they safeguarded the objects when the former suffered continuous wars. For the argument, a variety of neutralized terms have been invented for the two parties. For instance, "source country" was to replace "the countries of origin" or provenances, and "destination country" or "market country" to "the colonial powers" or the metropole. Furthermore, the latter was often described to be the keeper of the cultural heritage for all mankind with a "cultural internationalism", and the former the self-centered party with a "cultural nationalism".

This historical study has proved these arguments fruitless and pointed out one simple answer to the question “who owns the past” – and that is through war, be it an armed one or monetary one. One might say that there is law to resort to, instead of war. For instance, the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. But then, again, this convention does not cover the colonial collections, and as a matter of fact by nature – law is war. This has been made explicit in the letters between Einstein and Freud while questioning “why wars” (Freud and Einstein 1932):

Thus, under primitive conditions, it is superior force – brute – violence, or violence backed by arms – that lords it everywhere. We know that in the course of evolution this state of things was modified, a path was traced that led away from violence to law. But what was this path? Surely it issued from a single verity: that the superiority of one strong man can be overcome by an alliance of many weaklings, that **l'union fait la force**. Brute force is overcome by union; the allied might of scattered units makes good its right against the isolated giant. Thus we may define "right" (i.e., law) as the might of a community.

In this light, the UNESCO heritage charters, conventions or laws are veritable a war zone, for the “weaklings” (the former colonized or semi-colonized countries, the global south or the countries of origin) to unite and fight for the return of their lost cultural heritage from the West (the former colonial powers, the global north and the universal museums). And this specific war is invincible as like said all these legal or semi-legal instruments have a statute of limitation that rules out the colonial collections. If not the UNESCO way, then the Chinese way? For the important collections to return from the universal museums to their countries of origin – to serve in priority the people(s) who created them but were deprived of – the only way seems to be either by the force of guns or wealth, the hard power always.

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# Orphaned Objects: The Waste And Excess Of Restituted Cultural Property

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## **ABSTRACT**

One of the responses to the ongoing repatriation debates is questioning the valid use of the objects recovered from adhering to international conventions alone. In the absence of this, the restitution process remains incomplete. The case in hand is the vast caches of smuggled artworks and antiquities accumulated over a long career. They form a corpus of things exhibited as subjects of international obligations, to return and accept their return. But the value obtained by antiquities through restitution is often subject to waste (where the return of recovered objects is stalled halfway due to lack of funds and interest, or kept in storage sites away from the public eye), as the instruments of international law don't detail beyond the sovereignty of national ownership. Restituted objects released from the monetary exchange sphere are suspended in an economy of excess and waste. This paper seeks to define the unintended consequences of the formal repatriation mechanism as a possible cause for the abandonment of the universalist project of protecting and restituting cultural property.

## **KEYWORDS**

Repatriation; Rubbish; Collecting; Storage; Indian Art.

The term 'Orphaned Objects' is used in the art market's parlance as a descriptor for artifacts of significance with missing provenance. The term has three noted definitions, the first being small fragments of whole greek vases. The Italian carabinieri calls them *orfanelli*.<sup>4</sup> These broken shards are collector items, where the goal is to collect all the pieces of a singular vase so that the conservators can reconstruct it. The second definition of the term alludes to the objects whose findspot is unknown. In this case, they may also be called 'unprovenanced objects'. In this context, the appearance of an object suggests clandestine digging, theft, or illicit export of the object from its situ. The third, and the most novel use of the term, refers to objects whose acquisition is declined by western encyclopedic museums owing to legal or ethical reasons.

One of the dialectics of the cultural property debate is woven around the two counter-views of what makes an object orphaned. Is it when it is unclear where the object has come from? Or where will it go? Either way, being in this liminal space of being out of place and context can be seen as most resembling the substance showing the much-discussed properties of cultural property, which is subject to various legal regulations, interpretations, mandates and ethical codes. While referencing the ethics and counter-ethics of resourcing orphaned objects, Phillippe de Montebello of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) has said:

“As archaeologists have said, these unprovenanced objects are orphans, as their parentage through the absence of a known find spot is lost. But would these same archaeologists abandon a shivering orphaned child on a cold rainy day in the street or would they look for an orphanage? We museums are the orphanages of these objects.... They bring the works they acquire into the public domain. We display them. We publish them electronically as well as on paper. So to those who say do not buy an unprovenanced object, no matter how unique, brilliantly conceived and masterfully crafted it is, I would again ask, and what do you propose should be done with that object? Of course, it is to be deplored that works of ancient art are removed clandestinely from their site. Much knowledge is lost as a result, but we should not compound that loss by helping

the work of art to disappear. That would be a violation of our *raison d'etre*.”<sup>2</sup>

If, in museum spaces, ethical narratives are deployed to acquire unprovenanced objects, the same ethics of parentage are re-engendered to stop their repatriation to the source country. It is often touted that the objects carefully preserved, studied, and made visible in a western museum will get damaged and lost in obscurity outside of their stewardship.

As a museum piece, an object becomes a *singularity*, a terminal condition of being inalienable from the museum. ‘Repatriation’, from this perspective, is an act of violence to the integrity of the museum. The British Museum, for example, declined to repatriate the Parthenon Marbles, arguing that there is no suitable place to preserve the marbles at the Acropolis. Taking a pragmatic approach, the Greek government built a new museum so that the Parthenon Marbles could be stored and displayed in Athens while making them as carefully preserved as they are in the British Museum. The same is true for the Benin Bronzes, which are going to be displayed in a new museum whose chief purpose will be to house and display the Benin Bronzes. This mode of thinking has a streak of colonialism, that seeks to accumulate objects and resources from the margins to its center, which is better connected and has more resources to expend.

In 1954, W. G. Archer, the Keeper of the Indian Section of the V&A Museum, spent some months traveling around India. He visited several site museums in Sanchi, Sarnath and Kahjuraho, only to express his view that they should be closed and their contents moved to the National Museum in New Delhi. For him, site museums amount to “rather a waste of good sculpture”.<sup>3</sup> A relevant contemporary view was also featured in the essay ‘Mythology of the Antiquities Market’<sup>4</sup>, by author Ricardo J. Elia, who confronts the socio-functional aspect of the myth of collectors as Guardians of the past. According to the author, this myth created by the art market aims to sever the link between collecting and looting. Thus the idea of guardianship plays a pivotal role in transforming the view of the museum-going audience, which begins to view the objects as rightfully

collected even if many of them were purchased by the museum, knowing they are unprovenanced and highly likely to have come from looted sites.

This line of reasoning extends as a corollary that once repatriated the objects will not receive the same protection, attention and care that they receive in the well-endowed cosmopolitan encyclopedic museums of the world, further legitimating their collection. The threat of negligence comes in the form of a growing risk to cultural heritage from the politically motivated groups in nations where “new incentives for cultural purification”, “as more nations lose the illusion of national economic sovereignty or well-being”.<sup>5</sup>

Repatriation of cultural property is seen as benefiting only the ruling elite. Take, for example, the recently returned statue of goddess Annapurna from Canada to India, smuggled out of Varanasi by Canadian Norman Mckenzie. While studying MacKenzie’s collection during the preparation for her exhibition ‘From India to Canada and Back to India’, Divya Mehra, a Winnipeg-based artist, brought attention to the fact that the statue had been stolen from India over a century ago. The object thereafter was voluntarily repatriated by the University of Regina, where it was part of the Mackenzie Art Gallery, over to the High Commissioner of India, at a Zoom meeting, in 2020. The following year a ceremony to commemorate the repatriation was held in the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Many delegates, including the cabinet Minister for Culture, G. Krishan Reddy, were seen venerating an Annapurna sculpture. In his tweet addressing the event, he said:

Under the relentless pursuit of the @NarendraModi Govt, #BringingOurGodsHome continues & this morning, joined by several Union Ministers, puja was performed to Annapurna Devi Murti retrieved from 🇨🇦 at @ngma\_delhi.

Looking at the ceremony pictures, one could mistakenly assume that the sculpture at the center of the Hindu ceremony is the one that has been repatriated. The difference in size between the sculpture shown and the one repatriated is symptomatic of the very magnification which is required in

order to make sense of the repatriation itself (Fig 1). Also, there is no mention of the scholar whose work was responsible for uncovering the story being the sculpture's provenance and history of theft. Instead, the ceremony brings our attention to the return of the Annapurna sculpture, showing the commitment of the Prime minister in whose constituency the image was stolen and restituted. All the while, the actual idol remains missing from the scene.



**Fig 1.** The University of Regina officials preparing to repatriate the stolen 18th-century image of Annapurna to India.



**Fig 2.** Shri G. Kishan Reddy formally hands over Idol of Goddess Annapurna to Uttar Pradesh Government in the presence of several Union and State ministers.

In his book *The lives of Indian Images*, Richard Davis traces the biography of Pathur Nataraja, a bronze image from south India rediscovered after having been buried underground for centuries. In tracing its social life, he follows the object from its loss to its acquisition by the Canadian Bumper

Corporation in a series of exchanges where the object's value kept increasing with each transfer, and the information about its findspot became more and more obscure. The Indian government discovered it when the British Museum brought it temporarily for restoration. In hot pursuit, the court case between the temple authority of Pathur and the government of India Vs. the Corporation began in London. The most memorable turn of events from the ordeal was the court appearance of Lord Shiva in the hearing to secure his own image as Nataraja.

The repatriation of the Nataraja was a well-publicized event that drew considerable attention in the national media. The Indian high-commissioner to England, speaking on the importance of the case, said that the recovery of the Pathur bronze would deter “international gangs of idol lifters.” While the Chief Minister of the State of Tamil Nadu, to where it was repatriated, Jayalalitha, said that “our priceless cultural treasures have been plundered by foreign countries and we have been forced, through circumstance, to bear all in silence”.<sup>6</sup> This could have been a happily ever after for story of the Pathur Nataraja had it been not so keenly observed by Davis, who found out how the piece has been locked up in the Icon center in Tiruvarur since its repatriation, where it is not displayed and accessible to the devotees.

How can we reconcile this fate of repatriated images?, asks Davis. Images are being brought back to India only to be put in deep storage, remaining inaccessible. What can we make of this negligence? Is repatriation of images and pieces merely photo-ops, used to mobilize sentiments of nationalism and patriotism for political purposes?

For the devotees of the Nataraja, the Icon Centre represented an incarcerating space. The icons, which are literally the embodiment of living deities, are suffering from the bronze disease. When a bronze icon is within a south Indian temple, it is considered the lord of the temple. There, they are bathed, fed, prayed to, and even sing lullabies. The deities also listen to the devotees who come from far and wide places just to see the lord. Daily *abhikeha* activities include rituals such as bathing the icons in milk and other offerings. These daily rituals amount to caretaking that keeps the icon from

corroding and catching the degenerative bronze disease. Thus the existence of these idols in cold storage is considered unacceptable to devout believers.

Looking back to the history of repatriation, we can see that it has a transformative effect on the objects. It is known that Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* was not a masterpiece and the most famous painting at the Louvre before it was stolen in 1911. For nearly 400 years, the *Mona Lisa* was relatively less known, at least certainly when compared to its status today, until it went missing. Parisians, including Franz Kafka, came rushing to see the empty slot where the *Mona Lisa* once was. The slot was named the "mark of shame." The Italian Art thief Vincenzo Peruggia believed that Napoleon had stolen the *Mona Lisa* and was bringing it back to Italy, the place of its birth. The return of Monalisa with much fanfare transformed it into the masterpiece and centerpiece of the Louvre collection, where it is still the most famous painting on display.

The act of loss and repatriation has a similar effect on the status of the object, which is then shown in a different light, and another chapter is added in its biography. This is true in the case of objects returning to India as well. They are often brought back by high-ranking delegates and are rarely received by the prime minister of India himself (Fig 2).

The objects are shown at press conferences, and the images of their return are widely circulated in the media. Sometimes, objects are also worshiped in reconsecration ceremonies where the idol undergoes ritual services such as *abhisheka* to transform them into living deities. They are sometimes also the center of diplomatic meetings focused on cultural exchanges, such as the time when the Australian Prime Minister brought back stolen idols from the National Gallery of Australia to New Delhi (Fig 3), or when Angela Merkel handed over the Kashmir Valley Durga (housed in Stuttgart). In these instances, they transcend their identities as idols and art objects to become messengers of goodwill between nations while telling the stories of vulnerability, precarity, and the simultaneous devotion of those who willed them back into their homes.



**Fig 3.** Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi examining repatriated images.



**Fig 4.** Prime Minister Abbott of Australia returns Shiva Nataraja idol and Ardhanariswara idol to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi

According to a Comptroller Auditor General report on ASI in 2013, the government body was found to be functioning under serious financial and human resources deficits.<sup>2</sup> Some of the findings of the audit pertaining to the preservation, display, and storage of antiquities are worth recounting here. The audit found that even valuable antiquities found during excavations are held in poor storage conditions. At the time, there did not exist centralized information system for the antiquities, which posed a significant risk of theft or loss. 131 antiquities were stolen from sites and monuments and another 37 from the site museums recently. It was estimated that 95 percent of all antiquities were stored without ever being put on display.

Upinder Singh has noted that there are many things to be considered when thinking about storage in India. The clear-cut categories of storage and display are often not so porous in the context of India, which has a long history of state-sponsored excavations. The museum display and its storage are considered the inverse of each other. However, it is more common for site museums in India to have storage sheds that are halfway between storage and display. The storage can be seen to have three levels. The most important sculptures and antiquities are put under roofed spaces in a gallery space where visitors may examine them. Second, spaces are unroofed but bounded areas where antiquities are arranged in corridors along traversable pavements. Here, the antiquities are considered important but secondary to the most important specimens of sculpture and carvings. Lastly, many loose sculptures and fragments are shown in open spaces which are fenced within the site compound, an area protected by law.<sup>8</sup>

While describing the problems of storage in archaeology, Israeli scientist Morag Kersel — in the paper titled “Storage Wars: Solving the Archaeological curation Crisis” — points out the privilege of excavation and field archaeology over storage and curation at a policy level. She suggests that the future of archaeology is in the excavation of the archive rather than the sites.<sup>9</sup> If, on one hand, the ethical dilemma with the objects is whether to acquire them or not, Kristen Smeds brings our attention to yet another crisis in the museums, that of “what to keep and what to let go”. She compares the vast archives of stored objects in the museum to a non-representative dump. She remarks:

“Museums are bellying by the mass of their enormous collections, of which only a fraction will ever be displayed in expositions. What should we do with it all? Could we treat it differently than we do now? Could we perhaps at least be questioning the somewhat absurd idea of “eternal preservation” which is the word of the day in this business?”<sup>10</sup>

Within India, much of the concern regarding the preservation of cultural heritage focuses on the lack of proper facilities to store even the

antiquities seized or retrieved from smugglers. The vast open storages where antiquities are dumped resemble more like indistinguishable rubbish than the invaluable heritage of the people of a country. Yet, this forms a veil over an even more inconvenient reality of the vast amounts of unclassified objects lying unattended in the Museum storage of Indian museums.

As Michael Thompson has shown in his work *Rubbish Theory*, rubbish is, by its very nature, overlooked. Its visibility and presence often result from its placement. In other words, rubbish is only visible when it is out of its place, which can be said of the antiquities lying in open dumps rather than similarly amorphous antiquities collections in museums. This is an uncomfortable reality of repatriation faced by anyone who is enthusiastic about decolonising their regional and national heritage in western encyclopedic museums. But Thompson reminds us that rubbish is not a permanent condition, it is a liminal state in-between durable and transient, which every object must endure in order to be durable.

The antiquities storage is a space of nothingness where time has stopped by the virtues of the presence of all times simultaneously, without identification and classification. Seen through the lens of rubbish, the open storages are far from being valueless, and the dump is very rich. This rubbish should not deter anyone from accumulating it. It represents a category of objects that embodies a significant amount of potential for re-emergence through recycling, re-use, and re-absorption into everyday lives. Rubbish, according to Thompson, is an in-between category that lies between objects of transience and durable objects with practises of finding, displaying, or transforming and re-using.

To put these theoretical musings about the treatment of museum objects both as inalienable possessions and optically and ontologically resembling rubbish, I will draw upon the biography of a standing Buddha image, which has been returned from the Metropolitan Museum and is now displayed in the Gallery of Retrieved and Confiscated Antiquities at Purana Quila, New Delhi. The object in question is possibly a 6th-7th century AD Gupta period Buddha image from Bodh Gaya. It has the distinction of being

the place where the Buddha attained his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. It is a place visited by Buddhists from around Asia and the world.

The first Buddhist temple in Bodh Gaya was built in the 3rd century BC by King Ashoka, which had possibly attracted pilgrims from across different lands. A stupa was constructed nearby, along with a railing to surround the Bodhi tree to protect it from wild animals. Later in the Gupta Period, the main structure of the Mahabodhi temple was constructed, and it remains there till now. It was in this period that the standing buddha image was probably made. It is believed the main icon of the temple was made of gold as far back as the 7th century, when Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsang visited the place. In the following centuries, royal patronage started to decline slowly, and the influence of Buddhism began to diminish with the resurgence of the vedic faith and Muslim invasions soon after. Many of the broken sculptures in the Bodh Gaya site museum bear testimony to this period, as does possibly the standing Buddha we see here. The Burmese kings repaired the temple many times till about the early 14th century. From then on, the site had turned into a forest, and the Bodh Gaya was left deserted, neglected and abandoned.

In the 16th century, an ascetic Shri Ghamandi Giri, came upon the ruins while seeking solitude to meditate in the forest. It is said that he was unaware of the history of this place. He found the place suitable to establish a *math* near the ancient ruins of Bodh Gaya. The materials from the ruin were repurposed to make the new *math*. Many of the images of Buddha were brought into the new *math* where they became objects of worship by the local people, along with Shiva, who was the presiding deity in the *math*. It is likely that the standing buddha image was already a free-standing image by that time, and was venerated by the pilgrims who visited the *math* and its mahant.

In the later Mughal period, Bodh Gaya received royal grants, and more deserted idols of the buddha were brought into the *math* as the place started witnessing a flow of pilgrims. At this time, it is difficult to say how many knew about the history of the place. When the first British surveyors of India saw Buddha images in Bodh Gaya they were bewildered by the presence. They

were more accustomed to seeing Buddhist images in other places outside India, like Tibet, Thailand, and Burma, where Buddhism was a living religion. The Bodh Gaya was the property of the shaivite *math*, and it was only in the 19th century that Buddhist monks from Myanmar start rediscovering it from ancient texts. One can see the Burmese monks in Bodh Gaya till this day.

In the second half of the 19th century, Sir Alexander Cunningham, who was the Director-general of The Archaeological Survey of India, reconstructed the temple from its ruins. The temple, as it is seen today, is the result of the repair and restoration work carried out by the Cunningham and Belgar in 1880. The free-standing Buddhist images were brought into the Bodh Gaya compound and displayed in permanent corridors and galleries. These images, even if they are meant to be displayed as art, are worshipped by the devotees, who put gold leafs on them (fig 4). Had the Metropolitan Buddha not been stolen, it would have been considered a sacred image of the Buddha by the devotees.



**Fig 5.** Images of Buddha at the bodhgaya math adorned by the golden leaves placed by devotees.

The rediscovery of Bodh Gaya restituted the buddha images to their original significance as Buddhist.

Another shift in the meaning of the objects took place in the beginning of the 20th-century, transforming idols into art objects. This taxonomic shift happened with the writings of E. B. Havell, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, in the 1910s, and was institutionally completed with the excellent show “The Art of India and Pakistan”, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, in 1947-1948.

In his quest to redefine Indian art as a category of “fine art”, Havell was advancing certain images, such as meditating buddhas and dancing shivas as central to the Indian artistic traditions. Havell set up Indian art in opposition to the Western Canons of art. For him, it was the Other for European taste and sensibility. He wrote, “while the Christian art of the middle ages is always emotional, rendering literally the pain of the mortification of the flesh, Indian art appeals more to the imagination and strives to realize the spirituality and abstraction of a supra-terrestrial sphere”.<sup>4</sup> Following this discourse from the writings of Havell and Coomaraswamy, Buddha’s and Other images such as the Pathur Nataraj, also became collectable items of fine art in the context of the museums, where before they were merely considered as antiquities meant to shed light on the history of a place. The way the Metropolitan Museum of Art sees the standing buddha image from Bodh Gaya is not as an idol but as an art object.

Sometime after the independence, the management of the temple was removed from the *math*, and a new independent management was created under the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee Act 1953. It was in 2002 that Bodh Gaya was recognized as a UNESCO world heritage site.

The Standing buddha image before us was located in the compound of the Bodh Gaya *math*, where it was seen by the former director general of ASI Dr. Debala Mitra in her 1987 visit. However, on her next visit in 1989 the sculpture was no longer there. An image of the standing buddha, published in the Metropolitan Museum’s catalog, ‘Arts of South Asia and South-East Asia’ drew attention due to its similarity with the missing sculpture. After an inquiry, the object was returned to India on 23rd march 1999. Ever since its

return, the sculpture would have spent most of its time at the central antiquities collection in Purana Quila, with the premier repository of sculpture under the custodianship of ASI. It was only in August of 2019, that the image went on display at the newly commemorated Gallery of Confiscated and Retrieved Antiquities (Fig 5). Here, the idol tells its viewers not a story of the history or rediscovery of the place of Buddha's enlightenment but the danger to the place if the illicit trade of antiquities does now stop.

Similar to Greece and Benin, the gallery space now represents the rehabilitatory context where objects can be at home and put on display, as is expected by western museums. The standing buddha represents a case where the object has been orphaned more than one time and has lived various lives, as an idol of buddha, as an orphan in a forest, as an unnamed ancient deity, as a fetish, as an antiquity and as an art object in a museum. Each of the phases has further enriched the life of the standing Buddha.



**Fig 6.** 6th-7th century Standing Buddha image repatriated from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, currently on display at the Gallery of Confiscated and Retrieved Antiquities, Purana Quila, New Delhi.

### Conclusion

Repatriated objects which are kept in prison, like vaults and storages, acquire an additional characteristic that sets them apart from regular archaeological and historical artifacts. They develop the potential to tell stories of restitution even as their own restitution may be ceremonial or symbolic. Objects such as the Standing Buddha in The Gallery of Confiscated and Retrieved Antiquities are able to transcend transitory states of rubbish and become invaluable durables. This is not the rule but rather an exception, as countless antiquities still remain in the homogenous barrage of antiquities just a few doors down from this gallery at Purana Quila's 'Central Antiquities Collection'. How long they remain as unyielding rubbish might also determine the fate of both repatriation outcomes and the enthusiasm for it.

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