

What Comes After the British Museum?

Ross Andersen, *The Atlantic*, September 20th, 2023

When the British Museum opened its doors to the public in 1759, it was a new thing in the world. Scholars of museology have since given it a name: an “encyclopedic museum,” an institution that tries to tell the whole story of human culture across a single collection of objects.

5 The philosopher Ivan Gaskell has described an object’s entry into these collections as a “secular consecration,” which sets it apart from all other things in the world. But however consecrated these objects, a great many were acquired in unseemly ways. There is no doubt that at least *some*, and perhaps many, of the items in encyclopedic museums should be returned to their originating communities or their otherwise rightful successors. But what happens *after* the forced migration of stone has been undone? Could there be a new encyclopedic museum, and if so, what should it be
10 like?

I asked Erich Hatala Matthes, a philosophy professor, to imagine that humanity’s most precious cultural artifacts have all been returned to the nation-states where they were made. What, if anything, would be lost?

15 For one, cultures aren’t easily sliced up into discrete, bounded wholes, he said. They’re connected, and museums are well positioned to demonstrate those connections. In the British Museum, you can circle a porcelain vase from the Ming dynasty, admiring its white-and-blue gleam from every angle, and then, a few rooms over, you can see how it inspired a delftware plate from 17th-century Amsterdam.

20 In a world where repatriations were the norm, how could a museum still offer this experience? Any reconstituted encyclopedic museum would have to build its collection by consent. I imagine an international trust, its collections composed solely of artifacts that have been freely lent by the world’s nations.

25 I asked Nana Oforiatta Ayim, an art historian from Ghana and an advocate for repatriation, whether she could imagine an encyclopedic museum reconstituted by consent. “One hundred percent,” Ayim said, but only if the whole idea of an encyclopedic museum had been taken apart and put back together according to new principles. “Like a lot of these museums, the British Museum was set up as an ethnographic museum to study the other,” she said. “The West was the center and subject, and anyone else was an object. Once we start embracing different approaches to objects and different approaches to heritage, that’s when we will truly begin to have an encyclopedic museum.”

30 Encyclopedic museums are certainly not accessible to the entire world. As many critics have pointed out, they’re virtually all located in Western cities, in countries that are home to less than one-tenth of the global population. But existing encyclopedic museums display less than 5 percent of their collections; they have more than enough artifacts to tell an encyclopedic story about humanity several times over. Those of the future could be spread across multiple locations, with at
35 least one on every continent.

In the scenario I’m describing, the previous generation of encyclopedic museums—in London, Paris, and New York City, for example—could adapt to play a role. This evolutionary shift could be as ennobling as the Louvre’s transition from a palace to a place of public learning.