DOCUMENT 1 **Why are Western museums giving back their artefacts?**

Institutions are under pressure to return the spoils of empire, but doing so is far from simple

The Economist explains, Apr 20th 2021

NIGERIA IS MOVING closer to securing the return of some of its most treasured cultural artefacts. The Benin bronzes, sculptures that once decorated the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin, now in south-eastern Nigeria, were looted by British forces in 1897, along with thousands of other precious items. They are now scattered across more than 160 museums and countless private collections, mostly in the West. In March a German official travelled to Nigeria to discuss the return of some of the bronzes held in Berlin. The University of Aberdeen, in Scotland, has promised to return one of the bronzes within weeks. And this month the Horniman Museum in London announced it will consider returning its pieces. Why are they giving back the artefacts, and how far will the process of restitution go?

Some of the Benin bronzes lie in London, behind thick vitrine glass in room 25 of the British Museum's Africa Galleries. An inscription describes how the items came to be in the museum's collection. It has changed over the years. It used to tell of imperial bravery against bush savages; now it tells a story of colonial violence and expansion. At the end of the 19th century British forces razed the city of Benin to the ground, demolishing the mud-walled compounds, as well as hundreds of houses and ceremonial buildings. On the former palace grounds, officers built a golf course. Then they seized thousands of royal and sacred objects to take home with them. The bronzes were initially exhibited to show the vast reach of the empire. Today institutions such as the British Museum find themselves at an impasse, struggling to come to terms with their colonial legacy, taking some steps to return artefacts but not wanting to lose their prized collections.

Restitution also faces legal obstacles. Many Western museums are prohibited from disposing of their collections. In France, for example, all public collections are considered inalienable, making it impossible to remove even the smallest piece, whether to sell it or, more altruistically, to return it. The British Museum Act, a law from 1963, prevents the museum in London from doing the same. The law does set out limited exceptions (such as if the object is a duplicate), but returning the loot of empire is not one of them.

Still, there is precedent for governments relaxing such restrictions. In 1998, 44 countries agreed to the "Washington Principles of Nazi-confiscated art", a pact to identify and return works stolen during the Third Reich. When Britain's High Court ruled in 2005 that British Museum trustees could not return four drawings by old masters stolen by Nazis from a private collection in Czechoslovakia in 1939, the government passed a law to deal with the obvious injustice. Since 2009 trustees of various museums (including the British Museum) have had specific authority to return property stolen during the Nazi era back to its Jewish owners or their heirs.

Similar legislation could ensure the return of colonial-era artefacts. France offers an example. As the first president born after the colonial period, Emmanuel Macron has been more willing than his predecessors to consider restitution. He commissioned a report in 2017 which recommended the complete transfer of property to their countries of origin rather than long-term loans (as some museums have proposed). In November 2020, a new law was passed to allow the return of 27 artefacts to former colonies. Hermann Parzinger, the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, a government body that oversees 27 German museums, has called for international guidelines akin to the Washington Principles to help museums identify and return colonial heritage.

But this is unlikely to happen soon, especially in Britain. "Colonial history is still a touchy subject in this country, and you would need someone to put forward a test case," says Alice Procter, an art historian and author. According to Ms Procter, one reason that British lawmakers made an exception for Holocaust-era artefacts is the knowledge that Britain had no responsibility for the atrocities. But when it comes to the Benin bronzes, "the historical violence being compensated for is a British act, not a German one," making restitution a more delicate issue. Germany faces similar questions. In 2018 its government returned to Namibia the skulls of Herero and Nama people, whom German soldiers sought to wipe out after their rebellion in what was then German South West Africa. Indigenous groups criticised the German government for dragging its feet over the return, and over offering an apology. And the Natural History Museum in Berlin has been dodging requests from the Tanzanian government for years, asking for the return of a 39ft-long (13m) dinosaur skeleton discovered in the early 1900s by German scientists.

Legal hurdles may frustrate restitution requests, but politicians and institutions have shown a clear desire to defuse the colonial timebombs sitting in their public collections. Some governments, such as those of Germany and France, are now backing the return of part of their holdings. Others, such as Britain's, will probably continue to "retain and explain" controversial artefacts instead, even though the vast majority are not on public display. The British Museum, for example, has 900 Benin bronzes and displays fewer than 100 in its permanent collection.

Britain | The Brutish museum?

DOCUMENT 2 - Why is the British Museum always in trouble?

Partly because it was bad. But partly because it was good

"The Essex antiquities" doesn't have quite the same ring. The sculptures that were hacked from the Parthenon in the early 19th century go by many names. They are called the "Parthenon Sculptures", the "Parthenon Marbles" and, by traditionalists, "the Elgin Marbles" but never known by the name of the county in the south-east of England. Yet in 1902 part of the frieze from the Acropolis turned up in a rockery in a charming garden in Essex. Quite how it got there, as Mary Beard, a classicist, puts it, "we have no idea."

The British Museum gets in trouble precisely because people do know how it acquired its bits of the Parthenon, and much else besides. This week's drama was a spat between the visiting Greek prime minister, who likened the sculptures' presence in London to cutting "the Mona Lisa in half", and the British prime minister, who threw a tantrum in response and cancelled a planned meeting with his counterpart.

The Parthenon Sculptures are not the museum's only controversial items. In recent years it has also been embroiled in arguments over the Benin Bronzes (Nigeria wants them back), the Rosetta Stone (Egyptians want that one) and the Easter Island statues (Rapa Nui claims them). It gets in trouble because it has far too many objects—8m at the last count, which is considered greedy. More recently, it has got in trouble for having too few—it let 2,000 items get stolen, which is clearly incompetent. It has been accused of dealing in stolen goods, exhibiting "pilfered" objects and generally being "Brutish".

Not without cause. Many of its objects have objectionable back stories. Lord Elgin removed parts of the Parthenon so carelessly that they fell to the ground and shattered; the boat onto which others were loaded promptly sank. One infamous curator, E.A. Wallis Budge, bragged about how he had smuggled objects out of Egypt illegally by variously cutting them up, hiding them in books and, in one case, tunnelling into the back of a house while Egyptian officials guarded its front. "All Luxor rejoiced," he wrote when he filched them. unesco would have been less thrilled.

Such looting should be seen in context, however. "One mustn't judge Elgin unusually harshly," says Paul Cartledge, emeritus professor of Greek at Cambridge. For Elgin was egregious but not exceptional. He wasn't the only one to nick things from the Parthenon: parts of it were hacked off as souvenirs and left in the pockets of pleased tourists. Museums in four other countries have bits of the marbles. If Elgin "hadn't got the Parthenon, a Frenchman would have got it". An alarming thought.

Indeed competitive nationalism runs throughout the history of museums. Nationalism provided an excuse to take things. Budge argued that it was better for him to nick a mummy and bring it back to the British Museum since it has "a far better chance of being preserved" there than in Egypt. It is commonly said that the Rosetta Stone has three scripts on it but as Neil MacGregor, a former director of the museum, has pointed out, it has four. On the side it reads "Captured by the British Army in 1801".

Nationalism also helped spur museums into existence. The British Museum was one of the first institutions to use the word "British" in its title and the first national museum to open its doors to the public, in 1759. It still spurs things on today. Most people never hear of an artefact until it becomes the focus of a row between countries, as the Parthenon Sculptures did again this week. The British Museum's website lists 1,699 objects also associated with Elgin. Since no nations are arguing about them, no one cares. The British Museum's history is flawed, then, but also influential. Today, it is taken for granted that the obvious thing to do with old objects is to gather them all in a room, add labels, a loo and a gift shop selling Rosetta Stone rubbers, and then open it all up to the public. This was not always so. The British Museum is in trouble in part because it treated objects badly but also because it treated them well. Unlike the bits of the Parthenon that disappeared in tourists' pockets, its sculptures are still there to get cross about. And, on the bright side, it also occasionally thwarted the French.

The Economist, November 30, 2023

DOCUMENT 3 - Turmoil Engulfs Canadian Art Museums Seeking to Shed Colonial Past

As Canada reckons with its colonial history, a push to « decolonize » museums has rocked its National Gallery and other museums

The New York Times, October 9, 2023

One of the fiercest fights in the past year in Canada has taken place not in a hockey **rink,** but inside the **stately facades** of its national art museum. Directors of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa have come and gone. Senior curators have been fired. **Patrons** have stopped giving. Public clashes have erupted.

Museums across the West are having an identity crisis, **wrestling** with their roles in society and their colonial heritage. But as Canada has begun **reckoning** intensely in recent years with the ugly chapters of its history with Indigenous people, its museums have pushed further than most in transforming themselves — **scrapping** galleries, rethinking their exhibitions, refashioning the stories they tell and who has the power to tell them, in a process called "decolonization."

That transformation has drawn criticism that culture is being politicized, and it has turned several museums into flash points. The tensions could have been confined to the rarefied world of museums if they had not reached the country's most prominent one: t**he National Gallery**, nearly as old as Canada itself, whose identity and national narrative it has helped shape. (…)

In an interview at the museum, Jean-François Bélisle, recently appointed the National Gallery's new director by the Canadian government, tended to avoid the word "decolonization," a term he described as "very loaded," but said confronting museums' roots was necessary.

"To a certain extent, all museums are colonial constructions, and some people have argued that true decolonization would require shutting down every single museum because they're born out of a colonial approach to the other," added Mr. Bélisle. He argues, instead, that change can come from questioning

assumptions, acknowledging **biases** and engaging in true dialogue. Not everyone agrees with the direction of the National Gallery.

"Too many museums in Canada have changed their mandate from places that are responsible for transmitting culture and for caring for collections," said Marc Mayer, a former director of the National Gallery. "Their job is not to either decolonize or to make Canada a less racist place." [...]

Much of the museum world has been contending with how to overhaul institutions intimately tied to Western colonialism. "All the values of museums are now being called into question," said Yves Bergeron, an expert on museums at the University of Quebec in Montreal. In Europe, museum decolonization has mostly meant starting to repatriate artwork **looted** from former colonies. But in Canada, whose colonial history consisted of taking land from the Indigenous and suppressing their cultures, museums are changing from the inside, Mr. Bergeron said.

In the 19th century, Canadian authorities discovered that museums could play a nation-building role in turning the former British colonies into an independent nation, Scientific museums were first established to help **spur** economic development. Then art museums — including the National Gallery, created in 1880, or about a dozen years after the country's formation in 1867 — told people who they could be.

"The National Gallery served to create a national identity by showing that there were Canadian artists and that there was Canadian art," Mr. Bergeron said.

The trouble was that the national identity it **fostered** had a **glaring** omission: It excluded the Indigenous inhabitants whom successive Canadian governments tried to marginalize from both the land and history. For most of its history, the National Gallery — the only museum whose mandate is to showcase the best of Canadian art to the country and the world — exhibited works by English-Canadian, French-Canadian and European artists, but not by Indigenous ones.

Until a couple of decades ago, Indigenous art was not considered fine art but ethnography — and relegated to the nearby Canadian Museum of History. Then a series of crises triggered the start of Canada's **coming to terms with** its colonial past, a process that spilled over into the art world.

"In Canada, the decolonization of museums took off with the growing awareness surrounding the First Nations," said Michèle Rivet, the vice chairwoman of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' **board of trustees**. The National Gallery's collection of Indigenous art two decades ago was "**willfully** inadequate," said Michael Audain, a prominent Vancouver-based homebuilder and one of Canada's biggest art collectors, whose foundation stopped giving to the National Gallery because of the **turmoil**.

"You got the impression that Canadian art history started with the mainly religious-based art of the ancien régime in Quebec," Mr. Audain said, referring to a period straddling the 17th and 18th centuries. "I think that to represent the history fairly of art-making in Canada you have to start with the original people of the land."

With backing from Mr. Audain, the National Gallery created the position of Indigenous art curator in 2007 and began building an important collection of contemporary and traditional Indigenous art. In 2017, it merged the works of Indigenous and Canadian artists in the same gallery. "The idea was to make it official and permanent so that we would always tell the story of art-making in Canada in a way that systematically included Indigenous art," said Mr. Mayer, who was the museum's director at the time.

Other museums are remaking galleries focused on Indigenous culture, including the Royal Ontario Museum, and the Royal BC Museum, where several wings were closed last summer with a sign explaining that it was "having conversations with communities throughout British Columbia about what the future of the museum could look like."

Document 4 - **Why the UK is lagging behind the world in returning artefacts**

Requests for artefacts in UK national museums to be returned to their countries of origin have become high profile in recent weeks

The Parthenon Sculptures, also known as the Elgin Marbles, at the British Museum in London are among the artefacts whose ownership is disputed (Photo: Daniel Leal/ AFP/Getty)

i news, By Sally Guyoncourt, February 28, 2024

A lack of political will means the UK is dragging its feet when it comes to returning museum artefacts to their country of origin, say experts.

Politicians have been accused of "muddying the waters" on museum matters and the Government of lagging behind much of the rest of the world in returning artefacts.

Lewis McNaught, founder and managing editor of ReturningHeritage.com, told **i**: "We now have a growing groundswell of opinion on changing heritage legislation.

"But there is no chance this Government is going to be focusing on changing heritage legislation in the run-up to the next general election."

He said he did not expect there would be any progress until after an election. "It really comes down to who will win the next election," he added.

Controversy over the ownership of the Parthenon Sculptures (also known as the Elgin Marbles) was raised again last week after a fashion show was staged at the British Museum in the same gallery as the artefacts.

The Greek culture minister Lina Mendoni accused the museum of "zero respect" for the masterpieces and reiterated calls for them to be repatriated to Greece.

Requests for artefacts in UK national museums to be returned to their countries of origin have become high profile in recent weeks.

Chilean social media users reportedly flooded the British Museum's Instagram account in February with demands for the return of a moai statue, from Easter Island.

The Nigerian Government has also called for the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes.

However, trustees of national museums in the UK, such as the British Museum, are restricted by law over restitution of artefacts to countries of origin who demand them.

A number of acts of parliament, such as The British Museum Act 1963 and the National Heritage Act of 1983, determine how collections in national museums are managed and held.

Alexander Herman, director of the Institute of Art and Law, said: "Each act is a little bit different but generally speaking they are to ensure the collections are managed by the trustees."

There are only a few exceptional cases under which artefacts can be returned including if the item were a duplicate or considered "unfit to be retained".

So instead, some museums have entered into long-term loan arrangements with certain countries or organisations.

The V&A and British Museum recently loaned 22 items of Asante gold to Ghana in a cultural partnership agreement in which the items go to Otumfuo Osei Tutu II – the Asante king – on a three-year deal that may be renewed.

But it has sparked criticism within Ghana's government. Nana Oforiatta Ayim, adviser to Ghana's culture minister, told the BBC: "We know the objects were

stolen in violent circumstances, we know the items belong to the Asante people."

She said people were angered by the idea of a loan and hoped they would eventually be permanently returned.

The ongoing dispute over the Parthenon Sculptures led to Rishi Sunak cancelling a meeting with his Greek counterpart in November last year. The British Museum has said its trustees "will consider (subject to the usual considerations of condition and fitness to travel) any request for any part of the collection to be borrowed and then returned".

This idea has been rejected by the Greek Government, which wants them returned.

Mr Herman said of reaching a resolution, "there is a way of doing it but it is a narrow pathway".

"Each side needs to give a little to reach a resolution," he added. "There needs to be some will and some light touch coming from the political infrastructure.

"In my personal view, politicians should not be involved in whether or not artefacts should be restituted, it should be done by museums – that's what they are expert in.

"I think politicians tend to muddy the water, that's true in the UK and on the Greek side.

"They tend to take quite extreme positions and then they may not be around in a couple of years."

The question of political involvement has also been criticised by Mr McNaught, who said museum boards are populated by Government appointees, who push agendas "which are not necessarily the best interests of the museums."

"The Government has too much authority over trustees and than can only be bad for collections," he added.

He believes a reluctance for restitution from Government comes from a determination to maintain the UK's past reputation. "To return is to damage that reputation of Britain as a great trading nation," he said.

He added there was also a feeling that if we "started to return one thing then there would be a deluge of things", which had to be returned.

But he said in reality the number of artefacts is just a fraction of the items held in British collections.

Stalling restitution in the UK has put it "out of step" with much of the rest of the world, according to Mr McNaught, who said Germany has been negotiating the complete return of more than 1,000 Benin bonzes while Belgium and the Netherlands have established independent advisory bodies to help their governments respond to demands for artefacts to be returned.

"There are real results coming out of the worldwide community and not from the UK," he said.

A Department for Culture Media, and Sport (DCMS) spokesperson said: "We have no plans to change the law whereby some museums, like the British Museum, are prevented from removing objects from their collections.

"Museums and galleries in the UK operate independently of the government, which means that decisions relating to the management of their collections are a matter for their trustees."

The DCMS said there were also no plans to establish an independent advisory body.

Items that have faced calls for restitution

The Parthenon Sculptures, by Greece: A collection of Ancient Greek sculptures from the Parthenon and other structures from the Acropolis of Athens, which were brought to the UK by British diplomat Lord Elgin in the early 19th century and are on display at the British Museum.

The Benin Bronzes, by Nigeria: The artefacts, which date back as far as the 16th century, were removed from Benin City after British forces invaded the Kingdom in modern day Nigeria in 1897.

The Ethiopian Tabots, by Ethiopia: They represent the Ten Commandments and the Ark of the Covenant and were taken by British troops during the Battle of Maqdala (formerly Magdala) in 1868.

DOCUMENT 5

Decolonising museums isn't part of a 'culture war'. It's about keeping them relevant

Dan Hicks, ***The Guardian****,* Fri 7 May 2021

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's report on historical inequalities in commemoration explains that entrenched prejudices, preconceptions and pervasive racism of contemporary imperial attitudes led to hundreds of thousands of instances of the unequal commemoration or non-commemoration of African, Asian,

Middle Eastern and Caribbean people who fought for Britain in the first and second world wars. Claire Horton, director general of the commission, responded, "We will act to right the wrongs of the past." (…)

As the report was published, in the US a national debate about the human remains of Black people – in the context of not war memorials but the storerooms of museums – was gathering momentum. In July 2020, the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology apologised for its "unethical possession" of more than 1,300 skulls assembled by Samuel George Morton in the century for the pseudo-science of craniometry.

The ethical treatment of human remains is hardly a new topic, but it's clearly one where public dialogue is quickly shifting. When Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (where I work) reopened after the first lockdown in September 2020, all human remains were removed from display, and the famous "Treatment of Dead Enemies" case was dismantled. That 100-year-old exhibit promoted the racist myth that "headhunting" represents a coherent type of "savage" culture, while suggesting that the purpose of a "world culture" museum is to display what was taken from opponents of the British Empire.

Since the 1990s, the return of human remains has become a normal part of curatorial practice in UK museums. London's Natural History Museum returned the human remains of 37 Indigenous people to South Australia's Narungga community in March 2019. But this is a tiny proportion of what is held. Precise numbers are hard to come by, and little progress has been made since 2003, when a scoping exercise undertaken for the Ministerial Working Group on Human Remains indicated that England's museums contain the remains of more than 60,000 people across 132 institutions, including perhaps 18,000 from overseas.

Questions about human skulls, bones, and specimens of hair and skin have gradually expanded to encompass ancestral cultural objects taken under colonialism. Today, restitution is as likely to involve artefacts as human remains. In November 2019 Manchester museum returned 43 secret ceremonial Indigenous Australian items. Mangubadijarri Yanner, representing the Gangalidda Garawa Native Title Aboriginal Corporation, observed that this return was "important and necessary for the purpose of cultural revitalisation – because locked deep within these items is our lore; our histories, our traditions and our stories".

Britain's museums sorely need such cultural revitalisation right now, and the question of human remains and artefacts offers a position from which to see debates around museums in a clearer light. Some may seek to marginalise these acts of transparency, return and repair, or to denigrate museum colleagues seeking to advance professional ethical practice, dismissing them as "activists".

The outdated view persists that curators should restrict themselves to writing history while keeping collections preserved in amber. (…)

The conservative position is that to "decolonise is to decontextualise". But anti-racism in museums isn't about pretending that colonialism never happened. It begins with not pretending any longer that colonialism and its consequences are wholly in the past. Some of Britain's colonial-era museums may try to keep on simply displaying, narrating, and thus reinscribing histories of dispossession, violence and atrocity. Others will be open to dismantling colonial infrastructure where it's making outdated worldviews and institutional racism endure. Sometimes the context changes without you.

Acting to right wrongs in the treatment and commemoration of the dead is not unpatriotic or iconoclastic, but an urgent task of truth and repair among the living. For museums, this demands a new openness to transformation, driven by equitable partnerships with the audiences, stakeholders and communities that museums serve, and from whom they derive social legitimacy. At present, the gap between London's largest national museums and those people with the closest ties to world culture collections, both internationally and in the city, is widening. How can this gap be addressed?

One precedent here is how professional standards for managing and caring for Britain's historic built environment have evolved over the past three decades. Values-led conservation decision-making is displacing entrenched, elitist art-historical accounts of value based on connoisseurship and the architectural canon, with approaches that centre the significance invested by people in the places that they love. We need this ethos in our museums, replacing hierarchy and traditional authority with civic values driving change. Museums have transformed themselves before, for instance, through free access. In these changed times, how can we

address what Arts Council England's Let's Create strategy document names as its investment principles of "inclusivity and relevance"?

Let's be transparent about the tens of thousands of human remains taken under colonialism that languish in our museum storerooms. Let's be open to the return of stolen cultural objects, remaking international relationships with credibility and honesty. Let's dismantle structures of inequality, exclusion and racism where these endure from the colonial era in our institutions. These aren't iconoclastic attacks on museums, as some will claim, or part of some "culture war". They are overdue measures to keep Britain's global museums in step with an ever-changing world.

861 words

Dan Hicks is professor of contemporary archaeology at the University of Oxford and author of *The Brutish Museums*

DOCUMENT 6

The new vandals: how museums turned on their own collections

Douglas Murray, ***The Spectator,*** 03 December 2022

This week I had the pleasure of going to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. I say 'the pleasure' but visiting the Pitt Rivers was never precisely a pleasure. Twenty years ago, as an undergraduate, the collection was something of a rite of initiation. The place, filled with strange and wondrous objects, was famed above all for its gruesome pickled heads.

What did we think of them in those now distant days? That they were part of another age, naturally – a collection of artefacts from another time, representing another era, with its interests and curiosities.

Today the collection is still there, although the heads are not. But after a recent refurb the place has transformed into a shrine to a different time: our own. For the museum is now dominated by signs telling you that the collection is a terrible thing. Huge billboards tell the visitor that the museum is 'a footprint of colonialism', is 'not a neutral space' and yet 'can be an instrument of resistance'. Throughout the collection we are repeatedly hectored about 'imperialism and colonialism', naturally, but also colonial attitudes towards 'race, class, culture, gender and sexuality'. The signs by the exhibits repeatedly parrot the mantras of our day about 'hierarchies' and 'Eurocentric ideas'.

You might imagine the Pitt Rivers is something of an anomaly. But it is not. In today's Britain it is to be expected that our cultural institutions are run by people who hate the collection in their care as well as our culture and our history more broadly. Lest we forget, all this has happened under a Conservative government. (…)

If any museum curator in the land wonders where all this might lead, we can now point them somewhere. Specifically to the Wellcome Collection on London's Euston Road. In recent years the museum has been struggling with its collection, which was put together by Henry Wellcome in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The organisation has been commissioning 'anti-colonialist' writers to conjure up denunciations of its Medicine Man

permanent exhibition. So a new sign meant to accompany the casket for Henry Wellcome's ashes consisted of a denunciation of him for his 'power', 'money' and the British Empire. A collection put together by an open, energetic mind has been turned into a source of shame and provoked an urge for patricide.

This past weekend the collection had an online meltdown. 'What's the point of museums?' asked the Wellcome's official Twitter account. 'Truthfully, we're asking ourselves the same question.' The museum went on to flagellate itself over its collection, saying that the whole idea of it was 'problematic for a number of reasons'. One was that apparently the Medicine Man exhibition 'told a global story of health and medicine in which disabled people, black people, indigenous peoples and people of colour were exoticised, marginalised and exploited – or even missed out altogether'. And whereas the remains of minorities cannot be displayed, the remains of white people can be displayed but only so long as they are insulted. At the Wellcome, a fragment of the skin of Jeremy Bentham has an accompanying note by a pseudo-scholar, Dan Hicks, that says that Bentham leaving his body to science simply demonstrates the centring by museums of 'the white cis-male body'. Hicks goes on (at the invitation of Wellcome): 'Time's up. Dismantle Wellcome's enduring colonialism, its white infrastructure.' After that, I wouldn't just avoid donating my skin to a museum in this country. I wouldn't leave them the shirt on my back, and don't see why anyone else should either.

[The curators'] struggle session continued interminably. And so: 'The display still perpetuates a version of medical history that is based on racist, sexist and ableist theories and language. This is why this Sunday on 27 November, we will be closing Medicine Man for good.' They had tried to find a way around it, but in the end the fact that this display had been put together at all – by a man 'with enormous wealth, power and privilege' – made it impossible to continue.

[The] Pitt Rivers and every other collection in the land should take note. Once you start playing this game, you cannot win. Once you begin to shut yourself down, there is only one logical end point: total self-destruction.

DOCUMENT 7

Les défis posés par la restitution à l'Afrique des biens culturels pillés durant la colonisation

Par Francesca Fattori, Floriane Picard, Eric Dedier, Victor Simonnet et Cécile Hennion
Le Monde, 27 novembre 2022

Factuel - Alors que 90 % du patrimoine culturel subsaharien est éparpillé hors du continent, Paris s'est engagé, en 2017, à rendre possible, à l'horizon 2022, la restitution des pièces conservées en France à la suite des pillages coloniaux. Jusqu'à présent, très peu ont retrouvé leur terre d'origine.

Lors de son discours prononcé face à un parterre d'étudiants de l'université de Ouagadougou, au Burkina Faso, le 28 novembre 2017, le président Emmanuel Macron avait suscité la surprise en souhaitant que, *« d'ici à cinq ans, les conditions soient réunies pour des restitutions temporaires ou définitives du patrimoine africain en Afrique »*. Dans cette optique, deux chercheurs – l'écrivain sénégalais Felwine Sarr, économiste et professeur à l'Université Gaston-Berger de Saint-Louis (Sénégal), et Bénédicte Savoy, historienne de l'art française à l'Université technique de Berlin – avaient été chargés de rédiger un rapport.

Remis fin 2018, au terme d'une vaste consultation d'experts et d'acteurs politiques en France et dans quatre pays d'Afrique francophone (Bénin, Sénégal, Mali, Cameroun), le « Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle » dresse un constat accablant. L'exergue, emprunté à une lettre de l'écrivain Michel Leiris à son épouse, datée de 1931, en donne la tonalité : *« On pille des Nègres, sous prétexte d'apprendre aux gens à les connaître et les aimer, c'est-à-dire, en fin de compte, à former d'autres ethnographes, qui iront eux aussi les "aimer" et les piller. »*

Premier constat, la quasi-totalité (de 90 % à 95 %, selon les estimations) du patrimoine matériel des pays d'Afrique situés au sud du Sahara se trouve hors du continent africain, rendue inaccessible à la jeunesse africaine au point qu'*« elle en ignore souvent la richesse et la potentialité, si ce n'est l'existence même »*.

S'appuyant notamment sur des inventaires paramétrés selon les besoins de la mission, destinée à saisir la qualité, la quantité et la provenance exacte des collections africaines des pièces conservées au Musée du quai Branly, à Paris, les chercheurs concluent que tous les biens culturels obtenus pendant la période coloniale – quelles que soient les conditions de ces acquisitions (butins de guerre, vols, missions scientifiques, efforts de christianisation de missionnaires catholiques ou protestants, etc.) – relèvent d'une spoliation en raison des rapports inégaux entre les parties, et préconisent leur restitution. Même après les indépendances, nombre de pièces intégrant les collections muséales proviennent des guerres de conquête et des périodes de domination, après avoir transité sur le marché de l'art ou dans les familles des officiers qui les avaient rapportées.

Ce rapport a suscité de vives critiques. Stéphane Martin, à l'époque président du Quai Branly, défend alors le concept d'*« universalité »* de l'art et dénonce *« un cri de haine contre le concept même de musée, considéré comme une invention occidentale, comme un lieu quasi criminel dans lequel les objets sont plumés, déshabillés, où on leur retire leur magie »*. Dans les milieux liés au marché de l'art et des musées français, beaucoup redoutent que la restitution d'œuvres africaines provoque un « appel d'air » qui viderait les collections hexagonales, et s'inquiètent des conditions de conservation d'objets fragiles par des Etats jugés instables et dont les moyens muséographiques seraient insuffisants.

Au-delà de ces débats, la promesse du président Macron se heurte à des considérations juridiques. Les collections des musées publics français, dont 90 000 pièces originaires d'Afrique subsaharienne, sont protégées par leur inaliénabilité, inscrite dans le code du patrimoine (article L. 451-5). Seules des lois spécifiques peuvent permettre, au cas par cas, la restitution définitive à un Etat tiers d'un ou plusieurs objets.

Sur le plan européen, ces questions font désormais l'objet d'une vaste réflexion sur la nécessaire analyse critique des collections africaines des musées publics français, allemands, belges et britanniques, dont certains – à l'instar du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale de Tervuren (« Musée du Congo », lors de sa création, en 1897) à Bruxelles, ou encore du Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro (1878) – ont été conçus comme des vitrines d'empire. Le rapport Sarr-Savoy souligne ainsi *« combien la recherche active de biens culturels et leur transfert dans les capitales européennes ont bien été au cœur – et non à la marge – de l'entreprise coloniale »*. (693 mots)

Royaume-Uni

Le British Museum, détenteur de la plus grande collection de bronzes du Bénin – pillés par l'armée coloniale en 1897, lors de la mise à sac du palais royal d'Edo (aujourd'hui Benin City), situé dans le sud-ouest de l'actuel Nigeria – refuse jusqu'à présent toute restitution, au nom de l'universalité des musées. Mais les initiatives privées se multiplient. Fin 2021, les universités de Cambridge et d'Aberdeen ont rendu deux bronzes à Abuja. En septembre de la même année, une partie du butin pris à Magdala (capitale de l'ancien empire d'Abyssinie), en 1868, a été remise à l'ambassadeur d'Ethiopie à Londres, après avoir été achetée à des fonds privés par l'écrivain Tahir Shah, par le biais de sa fondation, en vue de les restituer à Addis-Abeba.

Allemagne

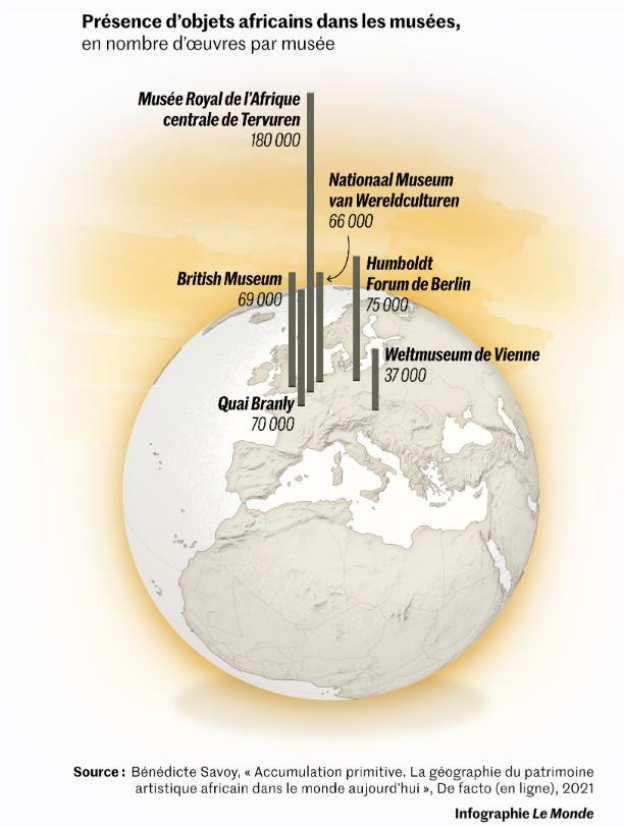
En 2011, l'Allemagne rend à la Namibie (colonie allemande jusqu'en 1918) des crânes d'indigènes herero et nama, victimes d'un génocide entre 1904 et 1908. En 2019, elle restitue encore la croix en pierre de Cape Cross – un objet du XV^{e} siècle qui servait de repère à la navigation –, la bible et le fouet du héros Hendrik Witbooi, chef du peuple nama tué en octobre 1905 en combattant les troupes coloniales. En août, Berlin signe avec le Nigéria un accord prévoyant la restitution de 512 bronzes (sur plus d'un millier conservés en Allemagne) issus du pillage du royaume du Bénin par les Britanniques.

Belgique

En février, Bruxelles remet à Kinshasa un inventaire de 84 000 œuvres prises au Congo (actuelle République démocratique du Congo, RDC) sous le règne du roi Léopold II (1865-1909) en vue d'une restitution. Le souverain belge, qui administra le Congo comme sa propriété personnelle, avait fait bâtir un musée pour accueillir les œuvres dérobées : le Musée de l'Afrique de Tervuren affiche désormais sa volonté de *« décoloniser »* ses collections.

Cinq ans après la déclaration de Ouagadougou, le bilan de la restitution est mitigé. Sur sept demandes présentées officiellement par le Bénin (en 2016), la Côte d'Ivoire (2018), l'Ethiopie (2019), le Tchad (2019), le Sénégal (2019), le Mali (2020) et Madagascar (2020), seules deux ont obtenu gain de cause grâce à l'adoption d'une loi, le 24 décembre 2020 : le Bénin et le Sénégal. Les requêtes d'Antananarivo et d'Abidjan ont reçu une réponse favorable, mais sont toujours en attente d'une loi qui permette sa concrétisation. Les

trois autres demeurent en suspens. Tous plaident pour l'adoption d'une loi-cadre qui permettrait d'accélérer ce processus et de le généraliser à l'échelle du continent.



DOCUMENT 8 - 'Dahomey,' Documentary About Looted Artwork, Wins Top Prize at Berlin Film Festival

The documentary, directed by Mati Diop, was awarded the Golden Bear. ***The New York Times,*** February 24, 2024

The top prize at this year's Berlin International Film Festival was given to "Dahomey," a documentary by the French Senegalese filmmaker Mati Diop about 26 looted artworks that were returned to Benin from France in 2021.

The unconventional feature, narrated in part by the gravelly, imagined voice of one of the artworks, is a playful exploration of **the legacy of colonialism and the interplay between history and identity in present-day Benin**. It is Diop's first feature since "Atlantics," a drama about Senegalese migrants that won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 2019.

In Diop's acceptance speech for the prize, known as the Golden Bear, she said that "Dahomey" was part of the "collapsing wall of silence" around **the need to return artworks looted by colonial powers to their original owners**. "We can either get rid of the past as an imprisoning burden," she said, "or we can take responsibility for it." [...]

Plundered artefacts return to west Africa in "Dahomey

A **brooding**, deep voice speaks in the dark. Surprisingly, it belongs to a 19th-century statue in a shipping **crate** on its way back to west Africa. The figure of King Ghezo, a former ruler of the Kingdom of Dahomey (in present-day Benin), was stolen in 1892 and sequestered in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. King Ghezo is both offended at his French designation—exhibit number 26—and apprehensive about his return to his homeland.

On February 24th "Dahomey", a captivating documentary by Mati Diop, a French-Senegalese director, won the Golden Bear award for best film at the Berlinale film festival. The film follows the journey of 26 artefacts from Paris to Cotonou, Benin's largest city, in 2021, in what was the first major restitution of looted African art by a former colonial power. The festival jury made a timely choice, **as countries are under increasing pressure to repatriate objects seized by their imperial troops.**

In 2017 Emmanuel Macron, the French president, declared that "African heritage cannot be imprisoned in European museums." (It is estimated that some 90% of Africa's art is held outside the continent.) The following year he ordered the return of the 26 objects Ms Diop documents. In 2022 Germany returned 21 items looted in the 19th century; Belgium has also given an inventory of 85,000 artefacts in its Africa Museum, almost 70% of the collection, to officials in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in order to determine which items might be returned.

By giving literal voice to one of the artefacts Ms Diop is able to **probe** historic wrongs. She also brings the discussion into the present by convening a group of students at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin. A highlight of the film is their spirited discussion of the ethical and emotional questions surrounding restitution. They debate whether France's return of 26 artworks—out of an estimated 7,000 from Benin—is "a savage insult", political manipulation or a useful first step towards reconnecting Africans to their cultural heritage.

The students **enliven** what would otherwise have been a linear narrative about the objects' journey. "Our generation has a collective amnesia" about the colonial past, says Gildas Adannou, who appears in the film and attended the premiere in Berlin; generations of people have been cut off from the artefacts' cultural and religious significance.
The fact that so few objects have been returned still stings. "It is humiliating," Ms Diop has said. "We need to do more, we need to go further." She sees her film as a way to "breathe new life into this question". In her acceptance speech she challenged countries and their artistic institutions to "take the responsibility and use it as the basis for moving forward".

Despite governments' expressed willingness to repatriate items, it remains a lengthy, often fraught process. In 2020 Portugal's parliament rejected a proposal for restitution. The British government recently announced that galleries and museums will be exempt from provisions in t**he Charities Act of 2022** which would have allowed them to return objects on moral grounds. (The British Museum alone has more than 900 objects from the Kingdom of Benin, in modern-day Nigeria.) Last year the Nigerian government said that returned bronzes would be handed to Ewuare II, the Oba of Benin, rather than the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. This has **spooked** some officials, who hope that restored pieces will go on public display rather than sit in a private collection.

King Ghezo, for his part, seems to have made peace with his fate. From his vitrine in Benin's presidential palace, he contemplates the role he can play for a people reaching for their cultural heritage: "I am the metamorphosis," he says.

The Economist, February 26, 2024

DOCUMENT 9

Just Stop Oil's Van Gogh soup stunt is the latest streak of radical art protest by women

'What is worth more: art or life?' asked protesters Anna Holland and Phoebe Plummer this month in an echo of the suffragette who slashed Velázquez's Rokeby Venus

Katy Hessel, ***The Guardian,*** Mon 24 Oct 2022

"You can get another picture, but you cannot get a life, as they are killing Mrs Pankhurst." These were the words of Mary Richardson who, on 10 March 1914, walked into London's National Gallery and slashed, with a meat chopper, Velázquez's Rokeby Venus (1647–51). Smashing through the glass, she scarred several times Velázquez's idealised nude in protest of the re-arrest of British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. Richardson was subsequently sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

This type of protest – and Richardson's words – resonated this month when Anna Holland and Phoebe Plummer, part of the Just Stop Oil protest group, made

headlines across the world by throwing a tin of soup over Van Gogh's Sunflowers (1888). Glueing themselves to the wall of London's National Gallery, they announced: "What is worth more: art or life? Is it worth more than … justice?"

Grabbing attention and sparking conversation … the Just Stop Oil protest this month. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Think what you like about the stunt – even Plummer agreed, "it is ridiculous". Ultimately, it worked for grabbing attention and sparking conversation, she goes on, "so we can ask the questions that matter". Margaret Klein Salamon, executive director of the Climate Emergency Fund, which bankrolls Just Stop Oil, confirmed: "In terms of press coverage, the Van Gogh protest may be the most successful action I've seen in the last eight years in the climate movement. It was a breakthrough."

For centuries, activists have used art as a form of protest, and a way to get noticed. As Holland pointed out in an interview with Frieze: "We take inspiration from the civil rights movement, the suffragettes, the queer movement … Our method of just throwing soup at the glass is a less violent gesture than that, but I like to think just as attention-grabbing."

Interacting with artworks and institutions is an effective way of sparking attention and controversy, and actuating change. There is power in both: they have the ability to alter the status quo. Institutions, with their role as leading cultural centres of the world, are places where debates of all sorts should happen. A recent example is Nan Goldin's successful campaign Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (Pain), which brought worldwide attention to the corruption behind the OxyContin crisis, and saw hundreds of cultural organisations drop their associations with the Sackler name.

Artworks, similarly, can reflect or be catalysts for change. Although it might not seem radical now, Van Gogh's paintings – and the style in which he worked, drawing on the impressionists – were deemed severely controversial by the establishment when they were first produced. They went on to be enormously influential in the development of modern art.

But the power of an artwork is also its ability to live on through different times, and speak to various generations and cultures. Whereas the symbol of sunflowers meant something else to Van Gogh in the 1880s, today they can represent the dying out of crops and, as the Just Stop Oil protesters remind us, how "we've seen 33 million people in Pakistan displaced by apocalyptic floods, 36 million have had their lives absolutely ruined by the famines in east Africa". Holland continues, "Yet, all it took was two young people to throw soup at a painting to get people talking more". This makes us question, as a society, do we value painted ones more than real ones, real ones that will enable our planet to survive?

The Rokeby Venus by Diego Velázquez at the National Gallery. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

Images – and recognisable ones – have the power to speak to the masses and make messages accessible. One of the most effective artist-activists in recent times is the Guerrilla Girls, who formed in 1985 after MoMA failed to include more than 17 women and eight artists of colour (out of 169 artists) in a major survey exhibition on painting and sculpture.

To protest their outrage, they took to the streets, anonymously and throughout the night, "because they were free" – free in the monetary value, and free from the patriarchy-ridden museums. With bold, loud graphics and text emblazoned with shocking statistics, they exposed the truth about the lack of equality in institutions by pasting posters on walls next to museums to shock and preach truth to the public.

Disruptive from the get-go, as they once told me, "Women artists were excited and empowered, and everyone else was really pissed off!" (See, no change is without controversy). They rightly targeted institutions considering, as asked in their 1985 poster, How Many Women Artists Had One-Person Exhibitions in NYC Art Museums Last Year?, they found that none had had exhibitions at the Guggenheim, the Met or the Whitney, and just one at the Modern (now MoMA).

Most famously, they questioned the abundance of nude female bodies versus the female artists on view at the Met. Placing a gorilla mask on Ingres's La Grande Odalisque (1814) they concluded that, "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." Revisiting the statistics in 2012, they found that little had improved: "Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 76 % of the nudes are female."

As with the soup incident, it might be ridiculous to place a gorilla mask on La Grande Odalisque – an idealised nude not dissimilar from the Rokeby Venus slashed by Richardson – but by using an identifiable image, or something that is "beautiful and valued", both were able to keep in the public's mind and draw attention to, as Plummer said, "the questions that matter".

More Links and Resources

● **A very interesting piece by Emily Harris, a former student of KH in Lycée Descartes**
The "Re:Imagine India"1 Project: Ambitions and Limits of British Cultural Diplomacy in India
https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/11703

●**An interactive report by *The Washington Post* on the Elgin Marbles**
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/22/elgin-marbles-british-museum-greece/

●***The Economist* calls for cultural artefacts to be repatriated when possible**
https://www.economist.com/prospero/2016/02/23/where-it-is-safe-to-do-so-cultural-artefacts-should-be-repatriated

● **A thorough survey on the (long?) way American museums have gone on diversity in the aftermath of the BLM movement**
https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/25/exclusive-survey-what-progress-have-us-museums-made-on-diversity-after-a-year-of-racial-reckoning

● **Bénédicte Savoy's article : Accumulation primitive. La géographie du patrimoine artistique africain dans le monde aujourd'hui**
https://www.icmigrations.cnrs.fr/2021/01/06/defacto-024-04/
● **VIDEO Son cours au Collège de France : Présence africaine dans les musées d'Europe**
https://www.college-de-france.fr/agenda/cours/presence-africaine-dans-les-musees-europe

● **VIDEO Decolonising Cultural Spaces: the Living Cultures Project**
Decolonising Cultural Spaces is a full-length documentary; part of the Living Cultures project coordinated by InsightShare, Oltoilo la Maa (Voice of the Maasai) and Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford in partnership with MAA Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The documentary follows a delegation of seven Maasai representatives from Tanzania and Kenya spending two weeks in the UK working alongside British museums to decolonise cultural spaces by making them aware of their colonial history and how this can be addressed responsibly.

● **President Macron's speech in Ouagadougou on 28 November 2017**
https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/discours-demmanuel-macron-a-luniversite-de-ouagadougou

●**The British Museum is full of stolen artifacts** (Vox) : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoTxiRWrv*p8*

● An interview of Tiffany Jenkins, author of Kereping Their Marbles, **How the treasures of the past ended up in Museums**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYO1oPMOq8w&ab_channel=OxfordAcademic%28OxfordUniversityPress%29
● **Should stolen African art be returned? | Inside Story – Al Jazeera English - 29 Oct 2021**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFl3D6YQJQk&ab_channel=AlJazeeraEnglish