

Is it time for museums and galleries to decolonise their collections, and if so, how should they go about it?

In this essay I will discuss why I believe it is imperative that museums and galleries decolonise their collections, and how this may be achieved.

What does it mean to decolonise? Sharon Heal, director of the Museums Association, a campaigning body that promotes the social value of museums, states that “to decolonise is to add context that has been deliberately ignored and stripped away over generations”¹. I believe that the best way to see objects in context is in their original, source, environment.

Throughout history, societies have traded and acquired treasures. For millennia² artwork and artefacts have been displayed in museums. The Age of Discovery saw these connections grow to more distant lands and, during the Age of Imperialism³, European countries began to expand their empires through colonisation. Large scale acquisition, mostly through force, resulted in the removal of unique treasures from their source for display in private collections and museums such as the British Museum, founded in 1753⁴. It is widely reported that approximately 90 percent of Africa’s cultural heritage is believed to be in Europe⁵.

¹ Sharon Heal (2019) *Museums Association*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/> (Accessed: 19 January 2022)

² Mark Cartwright (2020) *World History Encyclopaedia*. Available at: <https://www.worldhistory.org/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

³ Britannica (2021) *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

⁴ The British Museum (2022) *The British Museum*. Available at: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

⁵ Felwine Sarr & Bénédicte Savoy (2018) *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*. Available at: http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_fr.pdf

It is true that Europe, and the world, has greatly benefited from the possession of such precious and ancient artefacts, with European linguists and scholars deciphering the Rosetta Stone⁶ and ancient hieroglyphics⁷. Established museums in Western Europe have aided education and research as well as allowing exhibits on display to be enjoyed by people from many countries thanks to a politically stable climate. By contrast, in Afghanistan, many irreplaceable ancient treasures have been destroyed by the Taliban⁸ and the latest political crisis threatens the survival of thousands of objects spanning fifty thousand years of history. However, circumstances change, nations develop and progress. For example, the Rosetta Stone, whose return has been requested by Egypt, does not belong in the British Museum, but in the contextual background of Egypt, where it was originally found in 1799. It cannot be argued that Egypt lacks the infrastructure to hold the Stone either⁹, especially with the opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum¹⁰ on the horizon. Whilst much has been learned from the Rosetta Stone in Europe, it is time for it to be reunited with its source country, to be enjoyed there.

In recent years there has been a shift in the values of society, a call for change, aided by the internet's ability to connect people, and reflected in movements such as Black Lives Matter. Political shifts include Barbados¹¹ recent removal of Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, reasserting its cultural identity. One of the results of changing attitudes towards colonialism is an increased scrutiny of the means of acquisition and also the exhibition of contested artefacts. Established institutions and their entitlement to their collections are being questioned. In a lecture in 2017 President Emmanuel Macron stated "I am from a generation of the French

⁶ Elizabeth Nix (2021) *History*. Available at: <https://www.history.com/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

⁷ Britannica (2021) *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

⁸ Britannica (2016) *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

⁹ Farah Tawfeek (2018) *Egypt Independent* Available at: <https://egyptindependent.com/> (Accessed: January 30 2022)

¹⁰ Grand Egyptian Museum (2022) *Grand Egyptian Museum* Available at: <https://grandegyptianmuseum.org/> (Accessed: January 29 2022)

¹¹ BBC (2019) *BBC*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

people for whom the crimes of European colonialism are undeniable and make up part of our history,” announcing on Twitter that “African heritage can no longer be the prisoner of European museums”. The momentum for change is building and Sharon Heal is not alone when she says “Let’s stop defending empire and the status quo and open our minds to new narratives.” Former imperial countries should be doing all that is in their power to make amends for their past. The current generation may not have committed such atrocities but by refusing to acknowledge their colonial past they are causing harm just like their ancestors.

For too long museums have reaped the benefits of Europe’s colonial past, as reflected in the over eight million artefacts in the British Museum’s collection. Only one percent of this collection is on display at any one time¹². How can it be justified that artefacts lie in crates collecting dust, in museum basements and out of sight, yet cannot be repatriated to their ancestral homes to be enjoyed in museums by their rightful heirs? The planned construction of the Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin will have space for “the most comprehensive display in the world of Benin Bronzes”¹³. The British Museum should have no excuse for not returning treasures that are, contextually, far more important in Africa.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds in its collection an exhibit titled ‘Shiva Nataraja’. Lord Shiva is one of the main deities in Hinduism, and is often depicted in many different forms, one of which is as the cosmic dancer Nataraja¹⁴. For a long time in Europe, most art created was closely associated with religion. This was also true in India. ‘Shiva Nataraja’ was created at some time in the 11th century¹⁵ and was meant to be worshipped. Just like the bronze statue of

¹² The British Museum (2022) *The British Museum*. Available at: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

¹³ Martian Bailey (2020) *The Art Newspaper*. Available at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/> (Accessed: 29 January 2022)

¹⁴ Britannica (2021) *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/> (Accessed: 19 January 2022)

¹⁵ Farisad Khalid (2015) *Shiva as Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)*. Available at <https://www.khanacademy.org/> (Accessed: 19 January 2022)

St Peter in the Vatican city whose foot has been touched and kissed by pilgrims for centuries¹⁶, the Nataraja bronze¹⁷ statue of Shiva is a sacred object, the embodiment of the divine¹⁸, and holds great religious significance. The idea of the statue of moving St Peter from its resting place would horrify many Christians, yet Shiva Nararaja is thousands of miles from its origin.

Some prominent individuals have raised concerns about decolonisation, including the Director of the Victoria and Albert museum, Tristram Hunt, who writes “to decolonise is to decontextualise: the history of empire is embedded in its meaning and collections”¹⁹. This is the very embodiment of all that is wrong in the culture of museum administration. This is condoning the acquisition and continued possession of treasures through conquest, which is immoral and unethical.

According to the Museums Association “there are many examples of the misrepresentation of objects in museum displays that have only been corrected after dialogue with source communities. And there are countless instances where interpretation still needs to be rectified and stories freshly told”²⁰ This is surely where decolonisation must begin. Whilst the end goal of repatriation is noble, in the meantime museums need to make every effort to address their presentation of minorities and how they are treated in the context of their museum. A serious effort needs to be made to employ more diverse curators and leadership, rather than just a superficial attempt to appear more diversified as Shaheen Kasmani, a Birmingham based artist

¹⁶ St Peter's Basilica (2022) *Statue of St. Peter*. Available at <http://stpetersbasilica.info/> (Accessed: 20 January 2022)

¹⁷ Whilst the statue is described as 'Nataraja bronze' it is not bronze, most Nataraja pieces are of copper

¹⁸ Farisad Khalid (2015) *Shiva as Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)*. Available at <https://www.khanacademy.org/> (Accessed: 19 January 2022)

¹⁹ Tristram Hunt (2019) *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/> (Accessed: 19 January 2022)

²⁰ Sharon Heal (2019) *Museums Association*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

argues “Displays, exhibitions, staff positions and events need to be permanent features instead of meaningless tokenistic gestures.”²¹

Decolonisation not only requires a change in the attitude of museums but also changes in legislation. For example in November 2021 France returned 26 looted artefacts to Benin, after changes in the law allowed them to be repatriated. However, further legislation will be required for this process of restitution to continue, which may take many years²². As with most museum collections, the process of returning an artefact is very complex due to laws deeming artefacts inalienable. The British Museum also has similar laws to navigate, such as the National Heritage Act 1983²³, which prevents trustees from deaccessioning objects.

Benin had asked for the return of the Bronzes to be postponed due to a lack of a proper museum, for which France provided financial support. As in this case it should be the responsibility of the previous imperial power to provide support that extends beyond just the promised return. This is a successful example of decolonisation and shows that it is possible. If museums like the British Museum do not act now their lack of receptiveness will leave them behind in the efforts of decolonisation. The Museums Association has recently published the Supporting Decolonisation in Museums guidance (2021) which “is intended to help people from across the museum sector to engage with decolonising practice”²⁴.

To conclude, Europe has a long history of colonialism, a history that has allowed for the accumulation of many artefacts from around the globe. Museums across Europe that are now

²¹ Ellen Peirson-Hagger (2019) *The New Statesman*. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/> (Accessed: 30 January 2022)

²² Vincent Noce (2019) *The Art Newspaper*. Available at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/>

²³ UK Government (1983) *National Heritage Act 1983*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/>

²⁴ Museums Association (2021) *Museums Association*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/>

the guardians of this looted, rich, history need to acknowledge their unique position and begin to make amends for the trauma and suffering that fills their past. Whilst this process of making amends, decolonisation, will not be an easy one it is the responsibility not only of the museums, but society to hold them to this responsibility. The world is changing for the better in many areas and museums must not be left behind in the fight for equality.

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