



MUSEUMS RISE ACROSS AFRICA FOR REPATRIATION

According to UNESCO, the United States recorded the highest number of museums globally, with approximately 33,082 institutions as of March 2021. Germany and Japan followed on the list, with around 6,741 and 5,738 institutions, respectively. Overall, the current estimated total number of museums worldwide is nearly 104 thousand.

National museums have an immense impact on socioeconomic development with support from authorities, public and private funders.

- A 2015 report on the Economic impact of Museums in England finds UK museum sector generated £2.64 billion in income, contributed £1.45 billion in economic output to the national economy, and employed a minimum of 38'165 people made up of approximately 2'635 organisations running 2'220 sites across England.
- Official data from the Ministry of Culture (2017), the number of visitors to museums in France rose from just over 40 million in 2005 to 62 million in 2017. In 2018, the cultural sector of France's economy accounted for nearly 2.3% of its GDP, including 80'000 small and medium-sized businesses and 670'000 jobs or 2.5% of the working population.
- An economic impact study for the American Alliance of Museums in December 2017 reported the total economic contribution of museums in 2016 amounted to more than \$50 billion in GDP, 726'200 jobs, and \$12 billion in taxes to local, state, and federal government. More than 850 million visits are made annually to US museums from all across US society.

The archaeological institute of America found 85-90% of classical artefacts in museums don't have a record of ownership or a record of origin through which museums can justify the right to possess these objects. Most of these artefacts are from Africa and Asia.

In 2018, the French government commissioned a report and found that nearly 90% of Africa's cultural heritage is held by museums and institutions outside of Africa. France alone has 90'000 objects taken from eight of the twenty colonies France once ruled. Not only artefacts but the thousands of manuscripts collected in many museums are not accompanied by their original history, in which items selected on display are organised and given identifications by the western.

In museums where colonial objects are found, the insight offered into the original purpose or meaning of certain artefacts inevitably comes from a European perspective. The narrative for African artefacts in the western museum must be redefined by providing insights from an African perspective. The power to select, describe and decide the meaning of these items makes the western world authors of African history.

Museums acknowledge their collections as having uncomfortable histories tied to colonial violence. Many artefacts held in western museums and archives are known to have been appropriated over the ages through conquest and colonialism as they were acquired through armed privilege, military expeditions, missionary collections or taken without sufficient documentation of consent or adequate compensation.

The looting of African objects took place in war and in peaceful times. Most artefacts arrived in Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where museums have this all well documented. It was and still is justified by many museums as an act of benevolence as saving dying knowledge or for safekeeping. This may seem like a noble cause, but it means that Africans cannot be trusted to preserve their cultural heritage and natural treasures.

Even members of the Bonn working group argued that developing countries had no real relationship to their culture; some museum officials even claimed that historically illiterate civilizations couldn't interpret their cultural heritage. The idea that western art professionals were best suited to make sense of African cultural artefacts has no inherent value to the Africans that own these objects.

Western museums have actively misrepresented the provenance of their artefacts by claiming everything had been legitimately acquired, or even that Germany, unlike Britain, was largely innocent of colonial plunder on the continent. For this reason, the calls for repatriation must grow louder every day, and this stereotypical narrative Europeans have about Africans is still a serious problem.

Another tactic used by museums and libraries is to claim that they are making texts available to humanity by digitising them, but these manuscripts are only accessible to the western world who speak the language in which they are catalogued, and one requires internet access, which is to some extent beyond the means of those who could use them for their original purpose.

Even as they practiced self-protective secrecy, Europe's museums boasted of their unique capacity to enlighten the world about African art, but only a small fraction of objects have ever been exhibited, let alone widely appreciated in Europe. Returning looted African objects is the only international option available and the argument against restitution is that owners of these objects deserve access to their common heritage.

When it comes to most African countries' uniqueness in the world for possessing their historic objects, restitution will benefit the promotion of intercultural understanding. Withholding cultural heritage of humanity for national self-assertion can't be a plausible option for the future.

These grievances burst in October 1973 when the President of Zaire Mobutu Sese Seko denounced the "barbarous, systematic pillaging" of Africa's cultural heritage. His speech inaugurated a public debate on art restitution which accelerated when Ghana's kingdom of Asante requested the British Museum to return regalia looted during the sack of Kumasi in 1874. However, the British Parliament blocked the request, even though other European countries began to take the matter seriously.

Today, African works serve as a painful reminder of colonial times, but many western museums display them with pride by presenting them as prize treasure, in which they show no sense of remorse for the past crimes, nor show gratitude for the people from whom these were taken.

Former colonial powers can't conceal the evidence. By law, the burglar is not allowed to keep ill-gotten gains, no matter how long they were taken or how much they might have improved them, they must be returned to the country of origin.

The UK has a reputation for fiercely resisting the return of antiquities acquired during colonial times. Even when Britain's museums gave back all the looted objects, their galleries wouldn't be empty, and they wouldn't have to close them down. This is another tactic used and an old story that is often repeated. When it came to cases of Nazi loot and human remains, returns have been the norm for museum curators since the 1990s and such processes have not diminished museums; it has kept museums aligned with our time.

Belgium as another former colonial power kept the world's largest single collection of African art and promised to review all colonial-era acquisitions with the DRC. Belgium has returned more than a hundred artworks to DRC starting in 1976 but in recent years, it was France's President, Emmanuel Macron, who during a 2017 visit to Burkina Faso said it was no longer acceptable for a large part of the cultural heritage of several African countries to remain in France at museums and private collectors.

A year later, a report commissioned by Macron shocked the museum world calling for the permanent return of African looted objects. The report was a positive step in the right direction due to being the first time a European leader acknowledged the wrongdoing of Western institutions holding plundered objects hostage. France has since repatriated major objects to Madagascar, Senegal, and Benin, where President Patrice Talon hailed their arrival as the return of our soul.

Though the so-called Macron report made waves in the art world, it wasn't the report that was radical but the historical facts around the acquisition of the artefacts. Although the report only pertained to France, it sent shockwaves through the museum world and affected particularly the other big colonial powers.

Since the 252-page report was published that included a list of recommendations, France and Germany have made commitments to respond to requests from the DRC, Senegal, and Ivory Coast, among other countries. But the report hasn't rattled the conscience of the United Kingdom's failure to handover looted African artefacts. And the boldness of the British Museum along with other European institutions that proposed loaning the artefacts to African museums doesn't make sense since you loan artefacts that are your property.

In 2021 a Cambridge college, a French museum and a Scottish university all returned artefacts looted from West Africa, with activists and officials hailing a potential turning point in the yearslong battle to ensure Europe's reckoning on race extended to restitution of what it plundered. The Quai Branly Museum in Paris also handed over 26 artefacts to Benin that were looted in 1892. According to Reuters, they are among 5'000 artefacts requested by the West African country.

Some countries do concede the requests to return artefacts but delays in doing so can further stroke tensions. It took ten years of diplomatic pressure from the Mexican government before Germany agreed to repatriate two 3'000-year-old archaeological pieces, notes the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

While a few museums and institutions have decided to repatriate artefacts, the work is not yet done. We need to continue an open debate on repatriation of the looted objects because little concrete action has been taken by the International Museum sector even after the Macron report was released.

- Parthenon marbles taken from Greece are also waiting to be returned to Athens after more than 200 years. The Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis has called for the Parthenon sculptures to be returned to Greece on many occasions, even offering to loan some of his country's treasure to the British museum in return.
- We've also heard of the Rosetta stone as one of the most precious artefacts of all time that led to the discovery of at least three writing systems, or the Benin Bronzes which is a collection of metal plaques that once decorated the kingdom of Benin and are an African treasure illustrating how skilled African

art was and serves as emblems of the African struggle to reclaim art expropriation under the colonial rule.

- The human remains of the Kabwe skull is iconic to Zambia and must be returned. On June 17, 1921, a Swiss miner and a young African miner, working at Broken Hill, uncovered the Rhodesian Man. The Kabwe skull belonged to a hominid who lived some 300,000 years ago and since the 1970s, the Zambian government has expressed its desire for the Kabwe skull to be returned.
 - In 2018 the fossil was discussed at the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation. Yet, over one hundred years later, the Kabwe skull still hasn't returned to Zambia.
 - Zambian officials have detailed eloquent arguments citing moral obligations and international law on cultural artefacts and human remains for the return of the Kabwe skull. But, citing the sensitive diplomatic nature of this case, when Britain agrees to return the remains of the Broken Hill Man, it will provide a major boost to Zambia's national identity and represent a victory for repatriation efforts worldwide of former colonial powers to own up to the evils of the past.
 - Most hominin fossils discovered in Africa such as Lucy from Ethiopia and the many fossils found in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa have all remained in their countries of origin, the same must apply to the Kabwe skull.

Repatriation can address the historical injustice museums have caused. This is crucial to restoring Africans as producers of their history. After repatriation, Africans can determine the value and location of these collections as not all artefacts need to be preserved and put on display, some are a source of knowledge and expressions of life.

Repatriation is not about these artefacts going back to their country of origin and never being seen again, it's about the ownership of these artefacts being in the right place with its given understanding. It's irresponsible, offensive and we cannot continue with status quo where museums declare looted objects will over time become part of the heritage of the nations which house them.

Aside from attaining and reviewing inventories of western museums to identify objects that should be returned, the factual issue here is restoring full legal ownership and intellectual property rights of artefacts to the rightful owners and offer a new viewpoint to address the legal implications that govern the repatriation and restitution issue. Only a handful of objects have been restituted, despite thousands of outstanding requests. Few governments have enacted general return policies and some of the largest institutions, but the British Museum has actively avoided the conversation.

Away from political assemblies, museum professionals mounted a white-gloved resistance. It extended to sabotaging international committees, excluding dissenters, and demeaning African claimants as unfit to conserve their heritage, but the most crucial tactic was secrecy to conceal inventories and original information.

The conversation about the restitution of cultural property to Africa began in the nineteen-sixties and faded in the eighties when European museums succeeded in burying their demands and their colonial past began to sink into oblivion. These debates even reached the United Nations in 1978 where the Director-General of UNESCO, Ahmadou-Mahtar M'Bow, issued a moving appeal on behalf of the world's culturally plundered peoples. "Everything which has been taken away, from monuments to handicrafts were more than decorations. They bore witness to history, the history of culture and of a nation whose spirit they perpetuated and renewed" he said.

It's widely known that the restitution and repatriations conversations are closely tied to the royal family since the royal family has a history of acquiring looted objects, in which their immunity from law protecting cultural heritage has raised many questions.

Queen Victoria went so far to have a purpose-built exhibit made for such looted objects from India to Ghana, from Sudan to Nigeria, and across the British Empire objects taken in the process of deposing kings, emirs and sultans were brought out of storage and installed in the state apartment used to receive international guests.

The entrance displays are still there today, and the royal collection continues to grow. This also illustrates the importance of transparency since gifts to the monarch so often have complex histories. The politics of transparency must be inclusive politics to break the unilateral processes dictated by those holding stolen loot.

Fortunately, there has been a shift in what museumgoers' demand from institutions they hold dear. Today people want to know where the culture they consume comes from, how it got here, and whether anybody has requested them to be returned.

In Germany, there are even campaigns for museum archives to be published online, so museumgoers can research the facts of colonial pillage for themselves. The public are increasingly demanding transparency about looted objects and they deserve to know when cultural property is derived from theft. In today's world cultural legitimacy requires that looting is neither triumphantly displayed nor hidden from the public or covered up but made visible so that museumgoers can judge for themselves.

Culture has no competition, and a museum is not a mirror of national identity but a reflection of mankind's cultural heritage. By depriving people of their cultural artefacts and literature, you dispossess them of their history, knowledge, and philosophy. There should be no permanent historical African objects kept in western museums or with collectors when Africa has none.

Unfortunately, the arrogance of many western museums with their arguments being based on the idea that Africans can't host their cultural heritage has not only saved them but made these countries richer. The racist attitude that underpinned colonialism has not changed making the debate controversial.

While there is a legal and moral obligation to engage in repatriations wherever the crimes were committed, there is also a need to engage in a dialogue and discussion on museums to rise across Africa as an inclusive identity of the continent.

While many understand King Charles commitment to the over 100 British museums, orchestras and opera houses that have royal endorsements to continue helping them with fundraising and bolstering their profiles in the media, many can't still help envision such integrity of returning the human remains of the Kabwe skull to the rightful owners, the people of Zambia.

As the new king of Britain, King Charles with thousands of cultural institutions and charities in Britain that have royal patrons awaiting to be told what will happen next; we hope this occasion will be inspired by the King of Kings to do that which is right in his sight and receive an eternal crown of glory with lifelong service.

We hope his reign will bring a wind of change and trust your most gracious Majesty can take the repatriation of the Kabwe skull into due consideration, and wish long life and happiness to his Majesty.

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