

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

As per the ironic Western European claim of elitism and superiority, such a gross miscarriage of justice cannot continue to go unresolved and unacknowledged by Western Museums and Galleries. This essay first aims to vindicate why these British museums have a moral obligation to decolonise their collections, considering secondly just how this should be approached. To decipher the ethical and most productive way to ‘decolonise’ these collections, those most negatively impacted by Western colonial collections must be prioritised above all else. Practicality and feasibility are also significant when considering the methods of decolonisation; therefore, this essay will also consider relevant contexts such as that of the Benin Bronzes. There is a spectacle made of collections obtained by the colonisation of Non-Western countries, emphasising the social and political impacts of these colonial acquisitions such as the externalities of private collecting, as well as the legacy left on contemporary society- condemning these places and consequently the people living there as permanently an “other”¹

Western museums are designed by nature to enforce power structures, as is evidenced by the rise of private collectors from the 18th and 19th centuries. Acquisitions of art have come to symbolise class and power for hegemonic groups; this is best demonstrated by Sir John Sloane- a 19th Century English architect renowned for his collections of many artworks, particularly those of colonial descent. For Sloane, amongst other collectors, his acquisitions served particularly to serve his own self-narrative; a show of status and culture as a display of class and wealth- meant and designed to be displayed under the guise of a home since 1809². Colonial power’s primary impact is not submission on the part of those colonised, nor "the silent repression of native traditions," but hybridisation, or

¹ Olson, Gary A. “Encountering the Other: Postcolonial Theory and Composition Scholarship.” *JAC* 18, no. 1 (1998): 45–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866170>.

² Feinberg, Susan G. “The Genesis of Sir John Soane’s Museum Idea: 1801-1810.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43, no. 3 (1984): 225–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/990003>.

mimicry³ indicating that the very purpose of colonial acquisitions is purely to alienate and dehumanise from Western society. The introduction of private collections alongside colonial Europe gave a newfound value to colonial and ethnographic acquisition for the British Bourgeois- now, it was no longer a matter of aesthetics, skill, or name- but a display of cultural education and travels. “The whole concept of the Museum... [as] a colonialist, imperialist fantasy, born from the fallacy that somehow the whole world can be neatly catalogued, contained.”⁴ This further contributed to the aforementioned creation of an ‘other’ within the art world- as these objects are made a spectacle; for Western eyes to be in awe of and criticise. Alice Procter states that Sloane’s private collection recontextualises histories that go far beyond him, erasing their cultural contexts by anonymising the original artists and by extension any original purpose or meaning. Museums provide a selective narrative⁵, with the liberty to rewrite and reframe these artworks to fit within Western ideals. This suggests that a ‘decolonisation’ of Western museums and galleries is imperative, as colonialism exists within the very fabric of museums. It is time to decolonise precisely because the current structure of museums becomes an agent of colonial ideas- the alienation of Non-Western artworks is showcased alongside the appraisal of Western ones.

Decolonisation begins with reconstruction; both of the contents and location of colonial acquisitions. It is imperative that these collections are arranged geographically and in accordance with their time period; to do otherwise, homogenises entire continents as one- referring back to the concept of ‘otherness’ and emphasising the aforementioned alienation⁶ The British temporary exhibition, ‘South Africa: the Art of a Nation’ exemplifies why a rearrangement of both location-based curating alongside cultural education has an explicit impact on the central narrative taught to visitors of the museum. The curatorial team decided against an ostensibly neutral position, consciously taking a

³ Lazarus, Neil. “Disavowing Decolonization: Fanon, Nationalism, and the Problematic of Representation in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse.” *Research in African Literatures* 24, no. 4 (1993): 69–98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820255>.

⁴ Hunt, Tristram. 2019. "Should Museums Return Their Colonial Art". *The Guardian*, 2019.

⁵ Procter, Alice. 2020. *The Whole Picture*. Octopus Publishing.

⁶ Shoenberger, Elisa. 2021. "What Does It Mean To Decolonize A Museum?". *Museumnext*. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

political position that colonialism and a British legacy to be both recognised and ashamed of. The exhibition attracted a largely British audience, who left the exhibition with a far more comprehensive understanding of the true impact of British colonialism; one visitor was quoted stating “I came away with a better understanding of the cultural differences, and struggles of a continent.”- demonstrating just how influential the exhibition was⁷. However, whilst the exhibition was handled tastefully by the three Non-South African curators, a multitude of people seem to feel that the exhibition would have been more influential if curated by South Africans. Museums have been utilised as a display of authority⁸. The aforementioned narrative has been controlled by colonial bodies of power and therefore a subversion of this would have been deeply influential. The museums themselves are far too authoritarian in their approach to displaying colonial acquisitions⁹, as they have no real power in dictating the way in which cultural relics are understood by the general public. It is time that the victims of colonisation are given the power of their own narrative, choosing themselves how to represent their culture and struggles. Considering this, a standard must be set that when colonial artefacts are curated, workers specialised in the ethnographic nuances of the colonised country- this approach maximises two ideal outcomes: the representation of colonised countries, and the education of those unaware of the externalities of colonialism.

The reluctance of museums and galleries to return colonial artefacts demonstrates the necessity of why they need to be returned- a vital shift needs to occur in British attitudes towards stolen collections. It is a violation of any claim to morality if museums and galleries refuse to attend to the requests of Britain’s former colonies. It is severely paradoxical to acknowledge the utter brutality in the way colonial acquisitions were stolen, only to then not return them at the desperate pleas of countries such as Nigeria. The Benin Bronzes are a prime example of this negligence to accommodate

⁷ Giblin, John, Imma Ramos, and Nikki Grout. 2019. "Dismantling The Master’s House". *Tandfonline*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09528822.2019.165306>.

⁸ Golding, Viv. “Museums, Poetics and Affect.” *Feminist Review*, no. 104 (2013): 80–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24571951>.

⁹ Snoep, Nanette. ““Suggestions for a Post-Museum.”” In *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, edited by Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius, 324–35. Leuven University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jqxp.22>.

the needs of former colonies; the display of these relics is the display of the devastation caused by the violent British expedition to the Kingdom of Benin, which is now in contemporary Nigeria. Moreover, these relics are now being displayed at a price and value- classifying them in a manner considerably distant from their original contexts. These are no longer cultural representations of Benin, but a capitalist commodity used for status and gain; a pawn of ‘superiority’ for Britain to flaunt¹⁰. Retaining ownership of colonial acquisitions demonstrates that Britain has not strayed far from the barbarity that took place in recent history; to truly decolonise Western museums and galleries, progression must be made towards returning artefacts and relics to their cultures of origin to mitigate the negative externalities of colonialism. Approaching the return of artefacts, a formal requesting policy to consider claims of colonial acquisitions could be implemented as was done by the ‘National Museum of World Cultures’ in the Netherlands- ensuring that the return of these artworks is efficient and effective.

The return of the Benin Bronzes owned by Jesus College, Cambridge- as well as Germany’s return of 1100 looted Bronzes demonstrates a shifting attitude towards the relinquishment of British colonial artefacts to their countries of origin. Despite this, the British Museum’s entire existence is made up of stolen, colonial relics- the museum itself boasts of owning over 8 million objects¹¹, many of which have been stolen from their original cultures. Therefore, whilst it is not realistic to expect these museums and galleries to relinquish a vast majority of their collections- perhaps they should return relics recognised and valued by their countries of origin, and then work in collaboration with these countries on the display of collections. Therefore, the most culturally important artefacts will be returned and those that remain will be displayed with the utmost sensitivity. However, there is a case to be made that this is simply not enough- the return of these relics is a long overdue rectification of wrongs, not a mitigation of the effects of colonialism. Therefore, a true ‘decolonisation’ may involve both the return of relics in addition to compensation for the damages caused by Western Colonialism.

¹⁰ Marshall, Alex. 2022. "This Art Was Looted 123 Years Ago. Will It Ever Be Returned? (Published 2020)". *Nytimes.Com*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/arts/design/benin-bronzes.html>.

¹¹ 2022. *Britishmuseum.Org*.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/fact_sheet_bm_collection.pdf.

Perhaps to simply return the artefacts is to erase the horrific consequences of the countless British loots and colonies- absolving Britain from any potential guilt by choosing to forget, rather than open admission. George Santayana reportedly said “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”, a quote that encapsulates the tone that should be taken from this essay. As countries such as Nigeria have involuntarily loaned their relics, it has been suggested that they should be compensated by Western Countries in the form of lease fees for the stolen art¹². This serves to mitigate the injustices committed whilst simultaneously continuing to acknowledge those wrongs. Furthermore, with the return of colonial acquisitions and compensation for places- it is imperative that education of the true extent of British colonialism is implemented within these museums and galleries; as to ensure that the crimes of the past are not repeated.

To conclude, Western museums and galleries must take steps towards the decolonisation of their collections. The barbarity by which many of their acquisitions were attained must be rectified- and those stolen from must be compensated and aided. The decolonisation begins with the very structure of Western Museums themselves; the idea of the cultural ‘Other’ must be challenged and curatorship of stolen artefacts must be specialised and highly educated. Furthermore, communication between cultures and communities must occur to assure there is sensitivity within the displays of stolen, colonial artefacts. The decolonisation of museums does not only represent a progression within the art world- but also the beginning of a new cultural narrative for all of Western Europe as they begin to rectify the injustices of the past.

¹² Bossema, Wim. 2022. "Let Western Museums Lease The Art Stolen In Colonial Times - ZAM". *Zammagazine.Com*.
<https://www.zammagazine.com/arts/1292-let-western-museums-lease-the-art-stolen-in-colonial-times>.

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