

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

Visiting a museum is, for many people, is simply about immersing oneself in the past and being able to view incredible artefacts from across the world. However, beyond the surface-level awe there arise questions about how many of the artefacts got there. Collections in galleries and museums is one example of how the colonial powers are still benefitting from colonialism - and furthermore are not only evading the true horrors of the collections on display, but these collections can also be glorifying colonialism. This is because many of these artefacts that are being displayed in a country they do not belong to were mostly taken by force. The legacy of colonialism is not mere remnants, but instead still holds immense significance and is entrenched not only in the country's history but its present and future. Therefore, it is indisputably the time for museums and galleries to decolonise their collections – in fact, it is overdue.

An example of a collection needing to be decolonised is the 'Benin Bronzes', which are currently on display at the British Museum¹. These are sculptures made of bronze and brass and are estimated to have been created as early as the 16th century in Benin, a country in West Africa (modern Nigeria). The British Museum alone holds over 900 objects from the Kingdom of Benin, but also in the USA there are museums and galleries containing items from Benin¹. It was during the 1897 British Punitive Expedition against Benin² (an allegedly peaceful British trade mission) which escalated into the capturing of Benin by British forces, when these artefacts were accumulated. Not only did Britain occupy Benin, but also caused widespread desecration by the British, including the burning of the Benin Royal palace. Many objects, including the Benin Bronzes, were seized by the British and brought back as spoils of war¹ and then displayed in museums and galleries.

Another example is a painting entitled 'State Entry into Delhi' depicting the Delhi Durbar, which is on display in a gallery at Bristol Museum, England. This painting was done by the American artist Roderick MacKenzie and it details the 1903 festival in Delhi commemorating Edward VII becoming King of England. In the painting the Duke and Duchess of Connaught (brother and sister-in-law to Edward VII) are illustrated riding elephants in a procession, in which the Indian people are presented as watching with awe from beneath. This painting is not merely a representation of a historical event but it is additionally glorifying the imperialist grip Britain had over its colonies³.

These instances illustrate the pertinent significance of decolonising galleries and museums; this extends beyond simply removing the collections but also vitally addressing the horrific past and reason for their possession. For the countries lacking these artefacts that belong to them, they have lost part of their history and culture, and are still enduring the longevity of the legacy of colonialism even if they may have gained independence.

Yet, there are current efforts to decolonise collections in museums and galleries. An example of this is the 'Uncomfortable Truths' project focused on Bristol Museums there⁴. This is organised by a group of individuals who are seeking to address the need to decolonise the collections there by examining artefacts and exploring their social and political past.

In 2019, the fifteen member nations of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) created a plan⁵ which included the repatriation of African property from where artefacts were being held in other countries. The Commissioner for Education, Science and Culture Professor of ECO-WAS, Leoldo Mamado, stated 'We are going to present the status of our cultural property and succeed in returning them to our respective countries.'⁶

Repatriation of these stolen collections in museums and galleries is a key first step as part of their decolonisation. It is not ethical for a museum or gallery to display collections of stolen goods – and these artefacts hold no cultural value to the country they are being displayed in, but rather the country where they originate from. An example of repatriation is the return of the Sabre of Omar Saidou Tall (seized by France in

1893) from Paris to Dakar, Senegal⁵. In 2018, the President of France Emmanuel Macron declared in a speech “the conditions [are] to be met for the temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa” within five years⁷. In a tweet following the speech, Macron wrote that “African heritage cannot be the prisoner of European museums.”⁷.

Unfortunately, repatriation is often a difficult process. This can be due to the age of the artefacts, and that due to borders changing over time it is not necessarily clear which country the artefact should be returned to⁸. Another problem is the ability for a country to prove ownership of an artefact, especially if the seizure by which it was taken was not adequately documented. Additionally, while the concept of widespread repatriation taking place amongst museums and galleries in countries that were or are colonial powers, this idea does face opposition. A key reason for this is that it is argued that this will result in myriad artefacts being repatriated, and thus leaving these museums and galleries lacking resources for their current and future exhibitions.

In the United States, repatriation is almost exclusively referring to returning artefacts (including human remains) from collections in museums and galleries to the respective Native American communities. As a result of this need, a legal framework called the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in 1990⁹. In spite of this, there are problems remaining – such as the process of returning these artefacts being extensive, and reportedly many Native American communities were concerned by museums over-extending the process and not communicating effectively, essentially making repatriation impossible. While NAGPRA has resulted in the repatriation of tens of thousands of pieces, there is still up to a million Native American human remains alone which are dispersed across museums globally⁹. The request for the return of cultural objects and human remains from Indigenous populations is not exclusive to North America, but also in places such as Australia and New Zealand – and many of these illegally required artefacts took place in living memory.

As a consequence of repatriation, museums and galleries would have far fewer artefacts overall. One way to address this is with touring exhibits - where the artefact remains under the control of the country of origin but other countries are able to temporarily display it as part of their collections. A famous example of this is the global travelling exhibition of 150 Egyptian artefacts, including King Tutankhamun’s tomb¹⁰. This enabled other countries, such as London in England (in the Saatchi Gallery) and Japan. All of the artefacts have been returned to Egypt, the majority of which are displayed in the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo¹⁰.

Touring exhibitions mean that museums can display artefacts that do not originate from that country in order to maintain visitor numbers, but the exhibits are ultimately returned to the country of origin. Although, this is a costly process to transport an entire exhibition around the world with care and security - and so may not necessarily be economically viable for smaller, less well-known exhibits.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the global pandemic, the extensive use of technology has become far more central. This could be utilised to create virtual exhibits in galleries and museums, which would also allow collections of cultural artefacts from different countries to be viewed while remaining in their country of origin. Various museums across the world¹¹, including the British Museum in Britain, the Musée d’Orsay museum in Paris, and the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, Russia¹², already have virtual exhibitions. As part of decolonisation efforts specifically, the artefacts can remain in their countries of origin while allowing them to be viewed for other locations. Therefore, they will gain exposure for the exhibitions and potentially increase visitors for where the artefacts are kept.

While repatriation is arguably the most pressing and significant way for museums and galleries to decolonise their collections, this in itself is not fully decolonising them. Alongside this needs to be increased education about the history of colonialism without overlooking the horrific truth nor continuing to glorify the role of the colonial power. Without addressing how such artefacts were obtained when they are repatriated, this makes the act merely cosmetic and suggests a mindset still bound by the legacy of colonialism. However, utilising concepts such as travelling virtual exhibitions specifically in an effort to aid decolonisation are ways in which

museums and galleries can display their collections in a more ethical way – but crucially this does not ‘cancel out’ what was done.

References:

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