Art for Whose Sake?

by Michael Curtis

The pressure on Western countries, former colonial powers, to return and repatriate, art objects from diverse cultures and communities is increasing. This is partly due to resentment of past colonialism and partly an offshoot of BLM protests which has led to calls for “decolonizing” Western museums. The cutting-edge question is whether Western museums in the U.S. and Europe should return objects and cultural artifacts that were stolen, looted or taken by threat of violence. Western countries exercising colonial control in Africa and Asia, seized artifacts as spoils of war.

The complex and controversial issue involves a variety of factors: pertinent legal documents such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention, upholding seizure of stolen objects if there was proof of ownership, and calling for states to assist each other in recuperation of stolen cultural property, and the 1995 Unidroit Convention calling for return of illegal taken cultural property. Above all are principles of morality, identity, and nationality, rejection of colonialism in the

international community today, and the current landscape of political systems.

First there is the problem of numbers that might be subject to repatriation. The British Museum, the world's largest receiver of stolen property, holds more than 70,000 objects from sub-Sahara Africa. France holds 90,000 artifacts taken during its colonialist past. Belgium has 120,000, mostly from the Belgium Congo. Germany has more than 75.000, including 10,000 from war in what is present day Tanzania. The Smithsonian in Washington has more than 155 million objects to be examined.

Out of the millions of objects taken during wars or colonial domination, a few are especially valuable and are most likely to be considered by public opinion and political demands for repatriation. Least likely is the Koh-i-Noor diamond seized by the British East India Company in 1849 and now in the front cross of Queen Mary's Crown. But some others are being discussed: the Benin Bronzes taken from the country, now Nigeria, by British forces in 1897; the Moai, statues of human figures , mostly of deified ancestors, taken from Easter Island; the Gwaegal shield taken in 1770 from an Aboriginal Australian; the Rosetta Stone, taken by British troops from French troops in Egypt in 1801, now a popular tourist attraction in the British Museum, and of course the Parthenon, or Elgin, Marbles in the BM.

There has been understandable unwillingness on the part of Western museums and political authorities to admit guilt in the past colonial history and to consider returning objects which attract thousands, indeed millions, of visitors. However, this attitude has been changing as calls have increased to "decolonize" museums, in similar fashion to protests against honoring slave owners and colonialists, and the inhumanity of Nazi Germany.

In December 1998, 44 countries signed the Washington Principles on Nazi Confiscated art, an agreement to return art

stolen from Jewish and Eastern European people by Nazi Germany before and during World War II. A French report in 2018 recommended the full repatriation of African artworks, taken without consent, to the countries of origin. President Emmanuel Macron tweeted that African heritage cannot be a prisoner of European museums. On October 6, 2020, France passed a bill for the return of 26 bronzes which came from Benin.

The current issue is the proposal of the Smithsonian Museum to return some of the 39 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. These objects came to the West as a result of the British attack in 1897 on Edo, now Benin City, the seat of the empire, and seizure of 10,000 sculptures and objects, collectively known as Benin Bronzes.

Demands have increased. Egypt called for the Louvre to return pieces of a wall painting from the tomb of Tekati. Nigeria wants 32 cultural items from Boston. Restitution has been occurring in many places. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 2011 sent a Roman sculpture of Herakles to Turkey from where it was stolen. The Museum of the Bible in Washington returned more than 11,000 items to Iraq and Egypt. Australia retuned to India a bronze statue of the god Shiva looted from a Hindu temple. Germany in 2019 began to establish conditions for repatriation of objects in public collections derived from colonial rule. The Netherlands, similarly, agreed to return cultural artifacts taken from former colonies such as Indonesia.

Governments have entered the picture, as in the U.S. and Australia.

In 1990 the U.S. Native American Graves and Protection Repatriation Act was passed, a prelude to restitutive justice, as is a similar program in Australia, by which descendants and tribes can reclaim ancestral remains and items such as grave goods and skeletons, viewed as sacred objects.

It is worth examining the arguments made for and against repatriation, in a sense a dialogue between cultural nationalism, the view that objects are part of the heritage of a nation and must belong there, and internationalism, that cultural property belongs to and should be shown the world. It is important to consider the issue in the context of two factors, First, the present location of cultural objects taken in the past should be evaluated in the light of different sensibilities and values, not equivalent to present-day sentiments and sensitivities, especially as a result of BLM protests. Secondly, countries that were formerly colonies are independent and nationalist, and have resources. African countries, Senegal, Nigeria, Togo, Congo have constructed museums as homes for repatriated art and artifacts. Virtual museum tours are inadequate.

What then should be done? The case for repatriation rests on the principle that it is morally right and ethical for stolen or looted property to be returned to the rightful owner, and that it should be viewed in the context of the culture the created the art. Cultural objects belong to the cultures that create them and should not perpetuate colonialist ideologies. The argument is compelling. The stolen art is located in Western metropolitan cities far from the cultures from which it was appropriated, and difficult to be viewed for their citizens. Former colonial countries do not accept the argument of those against repatriation, that art Is a part of universal human history, and that non-Western art should be available in Western institutions. It is no longer true that artworks will not be safeguarded and protected or have inadequate facilities outside of Western societies. Finally, it is argued that art is best appreciated in its original historical context before the advent of colonialism and colonial ideologies, now not acceptable in democratic systems.

Refusal to return objects is based on various arguments. The historical nations and kingdoms from which many objects were

taken originally no longer exist, and it is uncertain where the objects should be repatriated. The new nations may have little connection to the culture and ethnicity of the ancient people who created the works., especially as cultural identities are fluid. The objects are better displayed in Western museums than in non-Western countries. More people are likely to view the objects in them than in non-Western surroundings, providing opportunity for people to learn of the historical context of the pieces. Finally, the objects, acquired in different ways and times, have part an integral part of the museums in which they are housed.

And what about the Elgin or now called Parthenon marbles which were removed by Lord Elgin from the Acropolis? Elgin claimed that in 1801 the government of the Ottoman empire which ruled Athens at that time had issued an official *firman* allowing him to remove any pieces of stone with inscription or figures from the Acropolis. But Elgin was never able to produce the actual document, and no copy of the *firman* has turned up in Turkish records.

The 5th century sculptures were integrated, mainly by Phidias, into the Parthenon and other places on the Acropolis. Elgin removed about half of them.

Should the Marbles be returned? George Clooney thinks so. Cultural, and other, decisions, should not depend on the wisdom of Hollywood. More relevant is that Britain is divided. In a British poll in October 2014, 37 per cent of citizens approved return of the Marbles to Greece, 23 per cent were against, and 32 per cent had no preference. The British museum is already apologizing for its holdings of colonialist history, but fears, if it repatriates, it will lose its audience of millions who come to see the Marbles.