

STUDENT OPINION

Should Museums Return Looted Artifacts to Their Countries of Origin?

Museums around the world contain pieces that were stolen or taken by force during colonial rule. Do you think they have a right to keep and display these objects? Or should they give them back?

By Nicole Daniels

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Think about the last time you went to an art or history museum. Which pieces stood out to you? Did you read the plaques next to them? Did those tell you where the artifacts were from and how they were acquired?

Today, many museums around the world contain art and artifacts that were stolen from their countries of origin during colonial rule or looted during war. Do you think museums have a right to keep and display those objects? Why or why not?

Three recent New York Times articles explain how museums, activists and governments are wrestling with this question:

In the Netherlands, an advisory committee to the Dutch government has recommended that the country give back items taken without consent. In “Return Looted Art to Former Colonies, Dutch Committee Tells Government,” Claire Moses writes:

The Netherlands should return looted art to its former colonies: That's the official recommendation of an advisory committee to the Dutch government.

After a year of research, including interviews with people in former Dutch colonies such as Indonesia, Suriname and several Caribbean islands, the committee released its report in Amsterdam on Wednesday.

The decision on whether to return an object, however, would ultimately rest with the Dutch government, and after a similar recommendation was made in France in 2018, only a single object has since been given back.

"The principle is fantastic," said Jos van Beurden, an independent researcher who has specialized in restitution since the 1990s, of the Dutch decision. "But I'm worried about the execution."

The lawyer and human rights activist Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You, who led the committee in the Netherlands, said in an interview that the government should acknowledge the injustices of colonialism and be willing to return objects without conditions if it can be proved that they were acquired involuntarily, and if their countries of origin ask for them.

The report calls for the creation of a body of experts to investigate objects' provenance when requests are made, and a publicly accessible national database of all the colonial collections in Dutch museums.

In the United States, Indigenous people have advocated repatriation as a form of restorative justice, using legal routes as well as others to reclaim stolen objects. In a 2019 Op-Ed, "As Native Americans, We Are in a Constant State of Mourning," Chip Colwell writes:

Some art dealers and curators have recently warned that this rapidly shifting landscape may, as the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle, put it, "eventually empty museums and galleries in Western countries." But such dire predictions portray repatriation as a zero-sum game. Museums should not see repatriation only for what is lost. They should also see what is gained.

In the wake of European colonial explorations from the 1500s onward, museums were filled with curious, beautiful, mundane and wondrous objects. Many of these things were purchased or traded, obtained with the permission of the individual maker or community. Yet, many were also procured with the threat of violence, without consent and in ways that violated cultural traditions. Many were simply stolen. When archaeological science took off in the late 1800s, unknown thousands of graves were excavated. When the Western art world fell in love with "primitive" art, collectors and dealers often resorted to extremes to obtain ancient treasures.

Indigenous peoples often tried their best to preserve their sacred objects and to protect the graves of their ancestors. But most communities were unable to stop the plunder.

On the heels of the civil rights movement, Native Americans began to more publicly renounce museums for stealing their heritage. As a result, in 1990 Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which provides a process for lineal descendants and tribes to reclaim ancestral remains and certain kinds of cultural items from American museums and federal agencies. This law, although imperfect, has facilitated the return of some 1.7 million grave goods, 57,000 skeletons and 15,000 sacred and communally owned objects.

And in France, Mwazulu Diyabanza, a Congolese activist, has taken the movement into his own hands. In "To Protest Colonialism, He Takes Artifacts From Museums," Farah Nayeri writes:

Early one afternoon in June, the Congolese activist Mwazulu Diyabanza walked into the Quai Branly Museum, the riverfront institution that houses treasures from France's former colonies, and bought a ticket. Together with four associates, he wandered around the Paris museum's African collections, reading the labels and admiring the treasures on show.

Yet what started as a standard museum outing soon escalated into a raucous demonstration as Mr. Diyabanza began denouncing colonial-era cultural theft while a member of his group filmed the speech and live-streamed it via Facebook. With another group member's help, he then forcefully removed a slender 19th-century wooden funerary post, from a region that is now in Chad or Sudan, and headed for the exit. Museum guards stopped him before he could leave.

The next month, in the southern French city of Marseille, Mr. Diyabanza seized an artifact from the Museum of African, Oceanic and Native American Arts in another live-streamed protest, before being halted by security. And earlier this month, in a third action that was also broadcast on Facebook, he and other activists took a Congolese funeral statue from the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, the Netherlands, before guards stopped him again.

Now, Mr. Diyabanza, the spokesman for a Pan-African movement that seeks reparations for colonialism, slavery and cultural expropriation, is set to stand trial in Paris on Sept. 30. Along with the four associates from the Quai Branly action, he will face a charge of attempted theft, in a case that is also likely to put France on the stand for its colonial track record and for holding so much of sub-Saharan Africa's cultural heritage — 90,000 or so objects — in its museums.

"The fact that I had to pay my own money to see what had been taken by force, this heritage that belonged back home where I come from — that's when the decision was made to take action," said Mr. Diyabanza in an interview in Paris this month.

Describing the Quai Branly as "a museum that contains stolen objects," he added, "There is no ban on an owner taking back his property the moment he comes across it."

Students, choose one of the articles to read in its entirety, then tell us:

- Do you think museums should return objects that were stolen, looted or taken with the threat of violence to their places of origin? Why or why not?
- If you do not think museums should return these objects, which of the approaches outlined in these articles seem most effective and thoughtful to you? Should museums themselves take on the work of identifying and returning stolen pieces? Should reclamation be made law, as it has been in the United States with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act? Should there be more activists like Mr. Diyabanza who reclaim stolen pieces? What other actions might be appropriate?
- What is your reaction to Mr. Diyabanza's protest? He described the museum he is accused of stealing from as "a museum that contains stolen objects," and justified his actions by saying, "There is no ban on an owner taking back his property the moment he comes across it." Do you agree with this statement and his approach? Why or why not?
- If museums have looted art and artifacts in their collections, do you think that should be acknowledged? Do museums have an obligation to say where pieces are from and how they were acquired?

Here's an example: Alice Procter, an art historian and writer, analyzes the label on the sculpture "Tipu's Tiger," originally from Mysore, India, now on display in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, also known as the V&A:

The label for “Tipu’s Tiger” begins with the sentence:

“Tipu Sultan was killed when the East India Company stormed Seringapatam in 1799.”

That’s written in a passive voice. It doesn’t mention the fact that he was killed by the company’s officers, and gives the impression that he just happened to die at the same time.

Later on in the label, it reads, “As was usual, the royal treasury was then divided up between the army.” There’s a whole history of looting and conflict being used as a way of creating museum collections. We know that East India Company officials were in contact with collectors and curators in London. We know that the trustees of institutions such as the British Museum, the V&A and the National Gallery are sending letters to military officials around the world at this time, expressing interest in particular objects and artworks.

What do you think of Ms. Procter’s reframing of the label? How does reading her explanation change your experience of this work of art? Do you think all museums should address their colonial past in this way? And if they do, is that enough to remedy the fact that these pieces were looted or taken by force? Why or why not?

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