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Museums, Archeology, Repatriation and Colonialism



The British Museum: losing its marbles?

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The British Museum at sunset

The British Museum is Britain's most visited tourist attraction and certainly its most iconic museum. The Museum's name indicates a home of national heritage, a collection of Britain's most valuable and most famous historical items. Certainly, it holds some fantastic examples of British archaeology, including artefacts from the Sutton Hoo burial, the Lewis Chessmen from Scotland and the Lindow Man, a first century bog body found in Cheshire. Yet, despite this invaluable catalogue of British items, the vast majority of the Museum's collections emanate from overseas. Alongside the Department of Prehistory and Europe, in which the above items are contained, the Museum also houses the departments of Egypt and Sudan, of Greece and Rome, of the Middle East, of Asia and, finally, of Africa, Oceania and the Americas.

In fact, the British Museum styles itself as a universal museum, displaying artefacts from across the globe. Its former director, Neil McGregor, describes its mission as being 'a Museum of and for

the World, making the knowledge and culture of the whole of humanity open and available to all.’ It is for this reason that the Museum aims to show such a diverse range of objects from every continent. By doing so, universal museums such as the British Museum and the Louvre in Paris provide valuable opportunities for comparison between civilisations. For example, it is possible to evaluate what people in different areas of the world were creating at any one time, and what similarities and differences there are in design. A new collaboration between the British Museum and the Google Cultural Institute emphasises this mission. On the special microsite, fittingly called ‘The Museum of the World’, users can click on an object to find out how it relates to other artefacts across time and space. But as well as demonstrating the interconnected nature of our world’s cultures, universal museums also aim to make their collections available to as many people as possible. Looking to fulfil this mission, the British Museum loans its artefacts both nationally and globally so that they can reach a wider audience.

The Museum’s collaboration with Google is another way of doing this. As well as the new microsite, users can also tour the Museum’s collections on Street View. This new initiative makes the British Museum more accessible than ever, meaning that anyone in the world can view its exhibits, provided they have access to a computer or mobile device.

However, the concept of the universal museum is met by scepticism from some quarters. George Abungu, the former director of the National Museums of Kenya, argues that universal values are ‘a way of refusing to engage in dialogue around the issue of repatriation.’ He touches on a sensitive subject, for the British Museum has long been engaged in a battle to retain its foreign collections. The most famous repatriation case is that of the Elgin Marbles, a collection of classical Greek marble sculptures that were originally part of the Parthenon in Athens. They were removed to Britain by Lord Elgin, who controversially obtained a permit from the local Ottoman authorities. Even at the time Elgin’s actions divided opinion, with Lord Byron attacking him in verse, writing that the antiquities of Greece had been ‘defac’d by British hands.’ Since then there has been a continuous debate over the rightful ownership of the marbles – Britain argues that they were obtained legally and saved from likely destruction, while Greece maintains that Elgin had no right to take the marbles, that they are part of Greece’s cultural heritage and that they should be displayed in their original context. The case has taken on a new prominence recently, with celebrity lawyer Amal Clooney championing the cause but, despite UNESCO offering to mediate in 2014, the British Museum refuses to engage in talks to resolve the dispute.

While the spotlight is firmly on the Elgin Marbles and other high profile requisition cases such as the Benin Bronzes, other claims go relatively unnoticed in the British press. Take the example of the Gweagal clan in New South Wales, Australia, who are campaigning for the return of a bark shield from the British Museum, among other artefacts. Rodney Kelly claims that the shield belonged to his sixth-great-grandfather, Cooma, a Gweagal warrior who fought against Captain Cook and his men when they landed at Botany Bay in 1770. He not only claims that the shield was stolen illegally by Cook, but says that a hole in the shield was made by a bullet fired by the British invaders. For this reason, the shield, alongside many other contested artefacts, is seen as a relic of British imperialism – for Australia, the Gweagal Shield is inextricably linked with the colonial experience and its retention by the British Museum is considered as modern-day cultural imperialism.

The Gweagal clan are by no means alone in their restitution claims – more and more countries are campaigning for the return of items which originated on their land. Each case is unique and complex and there are never any simple answers. For example, many cultural groups from which objects were taken no longer exist and it is not clear to whom they should be restored. Yet the Gweagal case highlights the reasons why the British Museum must find a new approach to requisition

requests. Firstly, the Museum's absolute refusal to engage with those who contest ownership of its exhibits is unjust – campaigners such as the Gweagal descendants have a right to be heard, and listened to. Theirs is a particularly compelling case. Not only can they prove that the shield was taken illegally, but they are blood relatives of those from whom it was stolen. Secondly, the British Museum must begin to engage with claimants in order to protect its own reputation. While many in Britain may not be aware of the Gweagal clan's claims, the story has been very prominently covered by the Australian press. By refusing to even listen, the Museum makes itself look guilty and scared, terrified that the loss of one high profile artefact could catalyse a flood of successful requisition claims. If it considered each request on its own merits, rather than blank refusal, the British Museum would demonstrate willingness to engage with the modern world and move on from outdated imperialistic thinking. Indeed, this is a matter of importance for our whole nation, since the British Museum is an iconic institution representing our country on the world stage.

Source: <http://www.thebubble.org.uk/comment/history/british-museum-losing-marbles/>