

Uncomfortable Truths: Colonialism and Conflict in the British Museum

Background Notes

Alice Proctor - 09 March 2022



Hans Sloane

Museums are spaces that narrate and shape nationalism and identity. They rely on the idea of a shared heritage, some sense of universal experience. But these spaces are also exclusionary, and their collections are tied to the history of imperialism. To challenge the colonial legacies of museums we have to work through the ways they make us feel, and come to terms with the discomfort of our histories.

There is an unmistakable trend right now in museums for projects that consider stories that have historically been excluded from museum narratives. In many ways its roots lie in the feminist interventions of the 1970s and 80s, that sought to identify and foreground the work of women artists, and later comparable movements reframing work by queer artists and artists of colour. The current wave of work is concentrated on the colonially subjugated, those who have been enslaved, and the legacies of imperialism. In some cases these projects also address the debate around restitution, and respond to the calls from activists and communities to repatriate objects. These projects have a consistent theme of restoring individuals to prominence, giving balance to the mainstream and established narratives by rediscovering those whose contributions have been marginalised.

Before the advent of colonialism, private collections that were the preserve of the wealthy and powerful acted as symbols of status by reflecting the views of their creators. With the expansion of European power through trade, enslavement, and imperial subjugation, these collections grew, and continued to embody the beliefs of their founders. The creation of museums as keeping places for the history of the world relies on exclusion, and the narratives they present will always be incomplete. At its core, the British Museum is based on the private collection of Hans Sloane, a doctor most famous for treating the most wealthy of British society, including Queen Anne, George I and George II. Sloane was also a hobby botanist, and collected books, antiquities and curiosities. He spent several years in Jamaica where he met and married Elizabeth Langley Rose, widow and daughter of two powerful and wealthy plantation owners. Sloane's collecting was funded and facilitated by this wealth - he also invested in the Royal African Company and South Sea

Company, corporations which sold and transported enslaved Africans on behalf of the British Crown. His collection is inextricably linked to British imperialism, and the Museum is only just beginning to grapple with this - in August 2020, a new display exploring his connections to slavery was installed, and there is ongoing work to recontextualise his life.

After Sloane, one of the most influential figures in the history of the British Museum is Joseph Banks. Banks was also a botanist, and an enthusiastic collector, who participated in Captain Cook's first voyage to the South Pacific in 1770. As well as the objects we know Banks donated to the Museum, there are several other pieces associated with him, including a bark shield that was "discovered" in the Museum storage in 1978. The Museum's attribution is largely based on the similarities between the 'found' shield and a shield included in the illustrations of Joseph Banks' collection made by John Frederick Miller in 1771. Miller illustrated many (but not all) of the pieces in Banks' collection from the South Pacific, and his drawing is very similar but not identical. The shield is now sought for repatriation to Australia, and specifically to be returned to the ownership of the Gweagal nation. As of May 2019, the British Museum have said they would be open to loaning the Gweagal shield – which is not the same thing as repatriation, and also offers no guarantee that it could visit Gweagal country — and have continued to research its history and provenance.

When the British Museum titles their gallery text on the Benin Bronzes 'The Discovery of Benin Art by the West', it is an act of erasure that immediately ties our understanding of the Benin plaques to a Euro-centric view, where their only value comes from being an aesthetic influence on western artists. The Benin collections were taken from the city by British

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Gweagal Shield



Benin Bronzes



Benin Expedition

troops in 1897, in a punitive expedition that was retaliation for the killing of several British soldiers by the City guard. The plaques, along with ivory and gold objects, were then sold to museums across Europe, with the bulk ending up in the British Museum. Choosing to frame the 1897 attack as a 'discovery' is misleading at best, and within the broader narrative of the British Museum seems to be a deliberate dismissal of the destructive, violent way in which the objects from Benin were acquired. To say that the arts of Benin had a profound impact on taste in Europe is legitimate, but it's unbalanced to not also address the impact that taking these objects had on Benin, or to give any sense of the bloodshed and death that enabled the British forces to take the city. The art and history of Benin is about more than providing a new artistic reference point for European artists, and there is little acknowledgement of the culture and lives of the artists who made these collections.

There are similar stories behind other collections, such as the objects from the court of Tipu Sultan that are now held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, most famously the Tiger Organ. Made in the early 1790s, the Tiger was originally kept with his collection of musical instruments, but was also an important piece of his political iconography. It came to England following his death and defeat by East India Company forces at the battle of Srirangapatam in 1799, as part of the collection of treasures taken from the city. It first went on display in the Company's India Museum, where members of the general public could see it for free on Saturdays, between 1808 and 1858. When the India Museum gradually broke up as the Company's property passed over to the government, its collection became part of the South Kensington Museum, which in turn became the V&A. The connections between British Imperialism and museum collections are unavoidable, and not limited to London's national galleries. The British Museum and V&A hold some of the most famous contested collections

between them, but questions of provenance and possession are relevant in any museum - as is the potential for connections to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the need to reckon with that past.

There's no such thing as neutrality when it comes to writing and displaying history. Every choice of phrase and framing has an impact on the way that the object, and the collection as a whole, will be understood, and it's essential that the people making these choices are willing to see their own subjectivity. In 2019, the British Museum's director Hartwig Fischer described the removal of the Parthenon Marbles from Athens to London as a 'creative act'; while it's certainly true that Elgin's actions created a new context for the sculptures, the phrasing of 'creativity' is dishonest. As with the Benin Bronzes, this framing implies that the audience most able to appreciate these collections is a British one. Too often the distancing of an object from its community is something used by museums to exclude and silence the voices and perspectives of Indigenous, colonized, and marginalized groups. Only by working with the community of origin can a museum provide a full understanding of an object's intentions, power, and use, and that information has just as much importance to a museum narrative as any material analysis. It's not an end point, and it is not a substitution for the repatriation of contested collections, but the reframing and re-centering of Indigenous and colonized voices and experiences is an essential beginning to that process. Museums can be transformed into the hosts, not the keepers, of history and culture, through more collaboration with the communities who created these objects. They can also try to be more transparent about their histories, and reflect on the systems of power that created them. This is an opportunity more than anything for institutions and their audiences to learn more about their collections, and to understand more completely our relationships with them.

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