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A 21st Century Empire: The British Museum and its Imperial Legacies

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Museums have a long history rooted in colonialism, but none come close to the lasting colonial legacy of the British Museum. Over the last several decades, governments and museums of former colonial powers have made efforts to repatriate cultural items which were taken from their colonies. Many museums around the world have all repatriated items and eliminated imperial images from their exhibits, but the British Museum has refused to do the same.¹ Although the British Empire is long gone, cultural imperialism is still alive and well in many institutions, and the British Museum is the perfect example of this. By looking at various case studies of stolen artifacts and describing the recent repatriation controversies and issues, it is clear that the British Museum is still an imperialist

1 Emily Duthie, “The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World,” *Public History Review* 18 (2011): 17.

institution that uses their vast collections from the former colonies to maintain their power and continue the legacy of the British Empire.

Founded in 1753, the British Museum became one of the first national and public museums in the world.² The museum would not have started without the donation of collections from Hans Sloane, an Irish physician and avid collector. Sloane began collecting in 1687 when he voyaged to Jamaica to serve as a physician to the governor of the colony. He returned to Britain with 800 plant and animal specimens, which would become the foundation of his encyclopedias on natural history. Upon his return, he built up his collection by absorbing the collections of his colleagues as well as buying items from travelers and explorers throughout the British Empire. As a result, his collection outgrew his two homes, and eventually he obtained 32,000 coins and medals, 50,000 books and manuscripts, 334 volumes of dried plants, and thousands more assorted items.³ Sloane died in 1753 at the age of 93, writing in his will that his collection would be left with King George II in exchange for 20,000 pounds for his son and on the condition that the government would create a museum to house his collection.⁴ Thus, Sloane's collection of assorted colonial items became the foundation of what would become the British Museum and was the beginning of an imperialist legacy.

Besides Hans Sloane's collection, some of the first items in

2 Duthie, "The British Museum," 12.

3 "Sir Hans Sloane," *The British Museum – General History*.

4 Hans Sloane, *The Will of Sir Hans Sloane, Bart.* Deceased. (London, 1753).

the British Museum were classical antiquities, such as Greek vases, as well as Egyptian mummies and a random assortment of North American items. By the early 19th century, the interest in classical antiquities grew immensely, and eventually the Department of Antiquities was split into three separate departments: Greek and Roman Antiquities, Coins and Medals, and Oriental Antiquities, which still remain today.⁵ The British Museum was so absorbed with ancient artifacts and collections from the British colonies that it was not until 1851, nearly a century after the founding of the museum, when the museum began to collect British and other European medieval objects.⁶ This demonstrates the perpetual colonial British obsession with the “other” and wanting to display fascinating objects from their colonies for their own country to see. Historian Emily Duthie states that “the British Museum could never be restricted to British things, for to do so would set a limit to the reach of British power, as well as to the gaze of the all-comprehending and autonomous subject.”⁷ This sense of power and superiority persisted throughout the colonial era in the British Empire and was exemplified especially in museums, where most items were taken from the colonies.

There are two major examples of looting during the colonial era: the Benin Bronzes and the Elgin Marbles. In 1897, the British led a punitive expedition in Benin, which is now in modern day Nigeria. Nearly one thousand bronze art pieces were seized by force from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin and two hundred of them went straight to the British Museum’s collection. This type of

5 “History of the Collection,” The British Museum – General History.

6 Duthie, “The British Museum,” 14.

7 Duthie, “The British Museum,” 15.

expedition was typical of the British Empire, resulting in the plundering of art and the looting of cultural items.⁸ In addition, some Europeans believed these bronze plaques and figures to be so beautiful that they could not have been created by Africans, but instead claimed that these pieces of art were created by Portuguese sailors who had traveled through Benin.⁹ Although Greece was not an official colony of the British Empire, the looting of the Elgin Marbles provides another perfect example of opportunism and imperialism. Thomas Bruce, the seventh earl of Elgin, traveled to Greece to bring back drawings and antiques to Britain. Instead, between 1801 and 1812, he forcefully removed numerous Parthenon sculptures and took them to London, where these items are now housed at the British Museum.¹⁰ Even after more than a century, both the Benin Bronzes and the Elgin Marbles still remain in the possession of the British Museum and are lasting imprints of aggressive imperialism.

In recent decades, the possession of such items as the Benin Bronzes and Elgin Marbles have become points of controversy. The governments of Nigeria and Greece have been demanding these items to be returned to them for decades, but they have been without luck. Nigeria has been longing for the return of the bronzes since its independence from Britain in 1960. However, the British Museum has resisted the permanent return of the bronzes due to legislation that bans museums from “permanently disposing of their

8 Ibid., 16.

9 Stephen Small, “Slavery, Colonialism and Museums Representations in Great Britain: Old and New Circuits of Migration,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 9, no. 4 (2011): 122.

10 Duthie, “The British Museum,” 16.

collections.”¹¹ Interestingly, the British Museum lent 35 of its 200 Benin Bronzes to the museum at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s. In fact, this was the first loan of any artifacts from the British Museum outside of England.¹² The British Museum was willing and eager to loan these items to the United States, but was weary about repatriating, or even loaning, the bronzes to their country of origin. As of 2018, Nigeria has been open to accepting a loan of the artifacts rather than full repatriation as a compromise with the British Museum, and current efforts are being made, albeit slowly, to work out a loan agreement.¹³

On the other hand, Greece has been more demanding regarding the return of the marbles and will not accept a loan because they “should not have to borrow their own stolen property.”¹⁴ One newspaper article from 1927 entitled “Greece Asks Return of the Elgin Marbles” describes the repatriation requests made by Greece, demonstrating the longtime prevalence of this issue. James Young, author of the article, believed that if the British Museum were to grant Greece’s requests for restoration of the Elgin Marbles, the Parthenon would be restored to its original placement and more repatriations would occur in the future.¹⁵

11 Adam Lusher, “British Museums May Loan Nigeria Bronzes That Were Stolen from Nigeria by British Imperialists,” *The Independent*, June 24, 2018.

12 John Canaday, “Art: African Bronzes in Philadelphia: British Museum Lends 35 Benin Plaques,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), July 14, 1965.

13 Josephine Livingstone, “The British Museum’s Looting Problem,” *The New Republic*, August 14, 2018.

14 Lusher, “British Museums May Loan Nigeria Bronzes.”

15 James C. Young, “Greece Asks Return of the Elgin Marbles,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), July 3, 1927.

However, little progress has been made to repatriate the marbles, and the issue still remains today. The Benin Bronzes and the Elgin Marbles are just two examples of how the British Museum has maintained their imperial power over “weaker” countries by refusing to return their highly prized cultural objects.

Following in Nigeria’s and Greece’s footsteps, other former colonies are now requesting repatriation of stolen artifacts, but the British Museum has refused on more than a few occasions. The issue of repatriation has been prevalent since the early 20th century, but demands for repatriation of cultural items have increased exponentially since then, especially in more recent decades. There are many reasons why former colonies are requesting these items to be returned to them. In the case of the Elgin Marbles, the Greek government argues that the marbles are important pieces of heritage that represent the “Greek soul” and should be fully returned to their mother country.¹⁶ The British Museum may display such artifacts for their beauty and uniqueness, but “the colonized have been deprived of objects that are central to their historical narratives of identity.”¹⁷ In addition, new museums are being created in these countries, such as the Acropolis Museum in Greece, that are prepared to house their own cultural objects with modern technology to protect their exhibits. Repatriation is also important to building up the self-esteem and sense of nationalism of the country of origin.¹⁸ Repatriation efforts give former colonies a voice on the world stage and empower them to stand

16 Celestine Bohlen, “Major Museums Affirm Right to Keep Long-Held Antiquities,” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), December 11, 2002.

17 Duthie, “The British Museum,” 22.

18 *Ibid.*, 22.

up to their former colonizer and demand the return of their own cultural objects.

Despite efforts by governments of former colonies, the British Museum has refused or ignored the majority of these requests for repatriation and believe that the museum's collections should remain intact. There is a major paradox concerning this institution's collections: the museum no longer accepts objects to its collections unless they were legally acquired, yet the museum also insists that the objects taken and looted during the era of the British Empire are "now part of the museum and, more broadly, the cultural heritage of the nation."¹⁹ Neil McGregor, director of the British Museum from 2002 to 2015, claims that the institution is a "universal museum" and that it has evolved from being an "imperial war chest" to a "global resource," therefore still indirectly laying claim to the objects acquired under the British Empire.²⁰ Because the British Museum sees itself as a resource of knowledge, it argues that cultural objects should remain in London because it is a widely visited city and will be seen by a large number of people from around the world. In addition, many believe that if the British Museum were to repatriate many of its objects, their museum would be nearly emptied. This belief perpetuates the assumption that the source nations of the antiquities are "unable to house and maintain their own objects and that they need London to preserve their history and heritage,"²¹ which is a common imperialist view that has not changed. A newspaper article entitled "Concerning the Ethics of Loot" from 1904 states: _____

19 Duthie, "The British Museum," 18.

20 Ibid., 15.

21 Ibid., 21.

For the possession of these marbles by the British Museum has proved the most efficacious means of preservation of some of the grandest masterpieces of the plastic art of ancient Athens, the sculptures which were left in their place at the Parthenon at the time of the conveyance to England having been subjected since then to the most lamentable injuries and deterioration through lack of proper care and wanton destructiveness.²²

Even today, there are still advocates who claim that the British Museum is the rightful home of cultural artifacts belonging to other nations because they believe that they are the only ones capable of taking care of the items. In short, the British Museum's claims to ancient artifacts and its reluctance and refusal for repatriation further reinforce its past imperial policies and characteristics.²³

Although museums are incredible spaces that provide an effective way of learning, beauty, inspiration, and knowledge, there are many ways in which museums can improve, specifically ethnographic museums, in order to "redefine their priorities in response to an ever more globalizing and multicultural world."²⁴ Campaigns by indigenous groups and activists have brought up arguments regarding repatriation, which have led to some successful repatriations and new museum policies in museums around the world. It is imperative for modern museum curators to know the imperial history of exhibits and to understand that context is extremely important

22 "Concerning the Ethics of Loot," *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), December 17, 1904.

23 Duthie, "The British Museum," 18.

24 Clare Harris and Michael O'Hanlon, "The Future of the Ethnographic Museum," *Anthropology Today* 29, no. 1 (2013): 10.

in reflecting the meaning of an object. One example of this was Sir Richard Temple's collection, in which he described bows, arrows, and spears used for pig hunting and fishing as weapons and the "arms of savages," reflecting the British imperial project: the civilizing mission.²⁵ The way in which an object or exhibit is displayed has the capability to alter the audience's interpretation of that object or exhibit. In addition, it is important to be transparent about the colonial history of certain items and how they were obtained. In a postcolonial context, it is considered inappropriate and culturally insensitive for museum curators to treat the material objects of other cultures as "exotica." Although this aspect has been continuously improving in recent years, the British Museum is far behind other institutions in this regard. For example, in 2017 the official Twitter account of the British Museum had an "Ask a Curator" session in which the public could ask them any questions about the museum and its exhibits. One question concerned the labeling of exhibits and making information available, to which the museum replied: "We aim to be understandable by 16-year-olds. Sometimes Asian names can be confusing – so we have to be careful about using too many."²⁶ The British Museum should aspire to a higher standard, especially considering the fact that the museum is built on its former colonies' items with "confusing names."

25 Claire Wintle, "Career Development: Domestic Display as Imperial, Anthropological, and Social Trophy," *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2008): 281.

26 Shazia Awan, "The British Museum Gleams with Stolen Riches from its Colonial Past – But Asian Names are Too 'Confusing' for Inclusion," *The Independent*, September 14, 2017.

The transition from being part of a powerful empire to a post-imperial institution has been challenging for the British Museum. By holding onto antiquities and cultural items from Britain's former colonies and claiming to be a "universal museum," the British Museum has further perpetuated the issue of imperialism in the museum setting. Despite repatriation requests made by various countries, most notably Nigeria and Greece, there has not been much progress made by the British Museum to fully return the Benin Bronzes and the Elgin Marbles. Unless there are repatriations of cultural items to former colonies, compromises between governments, and improvements within the museum itself, the British Museum will continue to remain an imperial institution in a post-imperial world.

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