

## The Ethics of Stolen Art

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Whenever an individual wishes to learn about history, culture, art, and everything in between, a common location you may find them in is a museum. Museums are a center of knowledge— from holding artifacts dating back thousands of years to displaying works of art from the modern era, they provide a wide range of objects from almost every time period. With museums serving as a curator of culture, they prove to place historical culture into a broader context in a modern day setting. However, the way museums have acquired these countless artifacts can be controversial, and in some cases, ethically provoking. Throughout history, colonization has occurred as a way of asserting power and dominance over other countries, as well as a way of a country obtaining more land and capital. As a result, an exchange of culture and traditions have occurred, making today's world as diverse as it is. But, colonization has undoubtedly come at a huge cost— with indigenous peoples losing their land, culture, identity, and much more. As part of this, colonization has led to the displacement of countless sacred artifacts, removing them from their place of origin. For example, during the 1897 “punitive expedition” of Benin City, in Nigeria, Great Britain seized thousands of sculptures, plaques, and more.<sup>1</sup> This came with the burning of the territory and resulted in Benin being subjugated to the British Empire. Thousands of these art pieces, named Benin bronzes, remain displayed in museums today, with over half being presumed stolen. While these works may have seemed both profitable and “primitive” to the British, these artifacts held large importance to the Benin peoples, as many were used as symbols of power for the Oba, or king, and functioned as integral parts of the Benin people's culture and history, and the current location of these artifacts is highly debated upon today.

By being exposed to a wide range of cultures throughout my life in traveling and exploring, I have been able to learn from the variety of museums available to me growing up. My frequents to San Francisco's De Young Museum, Legion of Honor Museum, and Museum of Modern Art have been an integral part of my understanding of cultures and developments made throughout history, and have truly always intrigued me. However, the gravity of the controversy present regarding precious artifacts I have easy access to was not made aware to me until I closely studied the history of these objects in my art history class. The context in which these artifacts were made and the purpose that they were made piqued my interest, and learning that many of these works were being displayed in countries continents away from their original location raised my curiosity. I was left constantly wondering about the state of the artifacts, and about the actions taken to restore these works to their original homes. Closely studying the history of colonial powers and their relation to stolen artifacts reveals the complicated power dynamics that have tense relations today. The ethics of a simple museum visit, while may act as a valuable learning experience, can actually contribute to the funding of previous colonial powers and further separate historic artifacts from their home country. With this in mind, I would like to pursue research in answering the following question: “To what extent do former colonial powers have a responsibility to return stolen art to its origin country?” By taking into account different perspectives from sources of different fields, I aim to answer this question with nuance and understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugster, David. “Systematically Looted? The Complex Paths of Non-Western Art.” SWI swissinfo.ch, January 28, 2024. <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/culture/systematically-looted-the-complex-paths-of-non-western-art/48238276>.

This topic holds hundreds of years of war and colonization behind it, where this issue affects many countries and cultures. The Benin Bronzes, along with hundreds of other culturally significant artifacts from non-Western countries, all held cultural and religious significance, but the stolen treasures now reside in the museums of former colonial powers, where locations such as the British Museum benefit monetarily from them. I wish to address this question as a way to work towards understanding the potential factors and necessities for restitution, or the restoration of stolen property to the original owner, on a global scale.

When approaching a topic regarding the interaction between colonial powers and the colonized country, it is essential to consider various perspectives that offer insightful commentary and nuance regarding these subjects. Considering this, I will introduce the following sources that I delve into as I research. Firstly, to understand the historical factors, I will explore Nosmot Gbadamosi's article, "Stealing Africa: How Britain looted the continent's art," which discusses the various instances of Great Britain's colonization over Africa, incorporating interviews from experts and contextualizing each siege that Britain had enforced.<sup>2</sup> Next, as a way to understand current circumstances, I will analyze ABC News In-depth's documentary "Should Europe Return Africa's Lost Treasures?," which details present day interactions about stolen art between European colonial powers, specifically in France, and formerly colonized countries and follows a reporter through their process of understanding/<sup>3</sup> This will hopefully allow me to gain a wider contextual understanding of what reparations are aiming to be done currently, as well as gain multiple perspectives from the interviews that were conducted in this documentary. I will also be looking at an article by Andrew Curry titled "Troubled Treasures" which provides personal speculation on the author's experiences learning from the circumstances of Nabil Njoya, the ruler of Cameroon's Bamun people, which I aim to use to understand an inside perspective from a ruler of a post-colonial country.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I will be interpreting Stuart Frost's peer-reviewed journal article "A Bastion of Colonialism," which highlights the general public's attitudes towards the British Museum, analyzing various statistics and interviews.<sup>5</sup> I believe that this source will be useful in tying my research together in understanding how the public perceives museum exhibits that are centered around imperial and colonial histories. With these resources, I believe that I will find a substantial amount of evidence to come to a finalized conclusion to my research question.

Gbadamosi's insightful article provides a contextual framework where she explains the role that Britain has played in the theft of African artifacts. Gbadamosi notes that there is a wide criticism against museums that have "universal" collections because oftentimes the history behind how each artifact is put into the museums is not specified, which erases part of the history behind each artifact.<sup>6</sup> Through an interview with Ayisha Osori, who is a pioneer for an

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<sup>2</sup> Gbadamosi, Nosmot. "Stealing Africa: How Britain Looted the Continent's Art." Al Jazeera, October 26, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/10/12/stealing-africa-how-britain-looted-the-continents-art>.

<sup>3</sup> "Should Europe Return Africa's Lost Treasures?" Video. Posted by ABC News In-depth, September 9, 2021. Accessed May 25, 2024. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\\_uXv-ZdRZY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_uXv-ZdRZY)

<sup>4</sup> Curry, Andrew. "TROUBLED TREASURES: RETURNING STOLEN LOOT ISN'T CLOSING MUSEUMS. IT'S OPENING NEW DOORS." *National Geographic*, March 2023, 34+. *Gale OneFile: High School Edition* (accessed May 22, 2024).

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A739006100/STOM?u=san45231&sid=bookmark-STOM&xid=8d97d4be>.

<sup>5</sup> Frost, Stuart. "'A Bastion of Colonialism': Public Perceptions of the British Museum and Its Relationship to Empire." *Third Text* 33, no. 4–5 (2019): 487–99. doi:10.1080/09528822.2019.1653075.

<sup>6</sup> Gbadamosi, Nosmot. "Stealing Africa: How Britain Looted the Continent's Art." Al Jazeera, October 26, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/10/12/stealing-africa-how-britain-looted-the-continents-art>.

organization in the restitution of Nigerian artifacts, Gbadmosi highlights that museums acted as a way for imperialistic countries to justify their conquests. It is also noted that in the efforts of African authorities trying to acquire their artifacts back, European governments refused their return because they could not trace their original owners to the objects. Britain's action to this was to keep contested artifacts, justifying this by assuring proper contextualization would be recognized. Another factor that contributed to African artifacts being highly sought after were inherently racist notions of African artistry, with works at the time being dubbed as "primitive" (Gbadamosi 2019). This led to colonists viewing the objects as highly shocking in its craft, making them even more prized and the British found it imperative to place these objects into museums. Gbadamosi details Britain's colonization of the Benin kingdom, in which it is stated that, after Britain completely burned the civilization, Britain had taken at least 3,000 (likely many, many more) artifacts from the city, and was auctioned off to collectors and galleries internationally. The Benin Bronzes were culturally significant as it documented the history of the Benin empire and its peoples, but are now dispersed in over 160 museums today, with single pieces having been auctioned off for over \$4 million, even with many being damaged and having evidence of the burning from Britain's violence. The royal court of Benin reached out to various museums in several countries such as Britain, France, and Germany, asking for commentary on potential restitution, with many responses largely ignoring the issue at hand.

Gbadamosi's article provides nuanced commentary and research on the contextual information necessary to approach this topic with nuance, and from the various interviews conducted prove the ongoing struggle that various African governments have had in trying to restitute stolen goods from European countries. Britain's reluctance and outright refusal in returning stolen Benin bronzes is reinforced by the statistics and statements given by various expert sources, and this allowed me to be able to gain a wider understanding of this topic with various perspectives. By centralizing so much information into one article, Gbadamosi is able to reinforce the immediacy that is necessary for restitution and that is emphasized through the harsh truths of the violent colonization communities in countries such as Nigeria has gone through. Additionally, the action Gbadamosi took by reaching out to specific museums directly proved the lack of communication and silence that the museums have offered.

ABC News In-depth's report called "Should Europe Return Africa's Lost Treasures?" presents modern day approaches to understanding current protests and efforts made by activists and researchers for the issue of stolen art to be addressed. First, reporter Allan Clarke speaks to Mwazulu Diyabanza, born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who, as a form of protest, takes displayed artifacts from French museums away, live-streaming to an audience online.<sup>7</sup> While each stunt is short lived, as he is often stopped and on occasion arrested, it proves to be a useful tactic in gaining media attention to his cause. An interview is also conducted with Romeo Mivekannin, a descendant of King Behanzin, the king of Benin at the time of Benin's siege under France. Mivekannin says: "To strip this society of its objects is a bit like ripping limbs off its body. It's a way of amputating their history."<sup>8</sup> Mivekannin expresses his family's history through painted renditions of family photographs, emphasizing an empty throne as a symbol of lost power in his works. While upon seeing his ancestral artifacts in museums

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<sup>7</sup> "Should Europe Return Africa's Lost Treasures?" Video. Posted by ABC News In-depth, September 9, 2021. Accessed May 25, 2024. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\\_uXv-ZdRZY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_uXv-ZdRZY).

<sup>8</sup> Mivekannin, "Should Europe Return Africa's Lost Treasures?" (9:22-9:33)

such as the Quai Branly Museum, Mivekannin states that he initially felt anger but also recognized these artifacts' place as a "product of history".<sup>9</sup>

This documentary provided additional perspectives on the subject of modern art, framed in a more modern day perspective in France. France's legacy of colonization has directly translated into the efforts of people such as Diyabanza and Mivekannin, who use the media as a way to convey their political messages. As a direct descendant of the Benin king, Mivekannin's opinion on the status and location of art proved very personal and important, while also accepting the fact that colonization played a part in the artifact's viable presence in museums today. With museums slowly recognizing and understanding these controversies— France has returned 26 Benin objects back to Africa since President Macron's promise of returning all African art back to its origins— it is essential to take in various accounts and opinions of this topic from people who have relations to the artifacts themselves. What Diyabanza has been doing to gain the public's attention is a striking example of what actions are being taken to protest the current status of these objects in museums.

Andrew Curry's article "Troubled Treasures: Returning Stolen Loot Isn't Closing Museums. It's Opening New Doors" focuses on Cameroon's Bamum people and their past with colonial looting of historical artifacts. In this article, Curry converses with Nabil Njoya, the current ruler of the Bamum. Nabil expresses no outward resentment towards the Germans, who colonized the Bamum from 1884 to 1916, but wants his great grandfather's throne— the Mandu Yenu— back. With the Mandu Yenu currently housed in Berlin, Nabil believes that there is a break in tradition. The throne represents the passage of power throughout generations, and as a result, a part of Bamum heritage is displaced. However, the controversy regarding restitution of this artifact is that Germany does not feel obligated to return the throne, as it is believed that the throne was given to the Germans as a gift. This showed an example of the justification of contested objects. The article also covers the British Museum, which has historically refused to return objects to its origin country. The British Museum claims to curate the museum into a showcase of "common humanity" (Curry 2023). In contrast, Germany's 2023 restitution of over 1000 artifacts back to Nigeria was the largest example of repatriation in history. After exploring the current situation with the British Museum, Curry shifts the attention to another example of repatriation that has occurred, this instance being the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., USA. The repatriation office set up by the National Museum of Natural History in 1991 has facilitated the repatriation of over 224,000 different items back to 200 different Native American tribes. Additionally, some items that are not repatriated are oriented in ways that fit the context of which they were originally meant for— for example, some objects are kept in cases with breathing holes, which align with certain tribal beliefs that view breathing as a necessary aspect to the object's spiritual purpose. This article emphasizes repatriation as a "transfer of control" rather than the removal or physical displacement of objects, which applies to the method of repatriation that the United States has endorsed in recent instances.<sup>10</sup> Curry additionally spotlights a sixth-generation bronze caster, Phil Omodamwen, a descendant of the Benin peoples. Growing concerns about a 500 year old transition potentially dying out is at the

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<sup>9</sup> Mivekannin, "Should Europe Return Africa's Lost Treasures?" (13:30-13:46)

<sup>10</sup> Curry, Andrew. "TROUBLED TREASURES: RETURNING STOLEN LOOT ISN'T CLOSING MUSEUMS. IT'S OPENING NEW DOORS." *National Geographic*, March 2023, 34+. *Gale OneFile: High School Edition* (accessed May 25, 2024).

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A739006100/STOM?u=san45231&sid=bookmark-STOM&xid=8d97d4be>.

forefront of this conversation, and notes that repatriation may be a step towards restoring this long lasting art form.<sup>11</sup>

Curry's article introduced new ways of approaching this dilemma by presenting a situation outside of Europe that was able to repatriate hundreds of thousands of works. By introducing North America's process of repatriation, it is clear that there are viable ways to give back stolen art, or even display them, in sensitive and understanding ways, a contrast to what has been shown through the British Museum's interactions with the African government. Additionally, the anecdotal excerpt delving into the possibility of traditional bronze casting art in Benin losing its practice provided another example in favoring repatriation. While museums may claim that retaining these artifacts is central to their goal to display as many globally diverse objects as possible, the objects' country of origin is left without part of their history and past, and placing them continents away makes viewership of these objects highly inaccessible to those located in their country of origin.

Finally, Stuart Frost's journal "A Bastion of Colonialism" presents information about the British Museum through statistics and interviews on overall public perceptions of this subject. Frost concludes that through the data collected, it is evident that the British Museum's displayed content is closely connected with Britain's colonial past. Frost specifies social media messages and posts directed towards the British Museum's public accounts that are heavily populated with subjects on colonialism, centering the Museum as a "place of loot" (Frost 2019). Frost also provides statistics on the British Museum's annual approximate 6 million visitors, which is divided into two groups— those who visit the free permanent galleries and those who visit limited exhibitions. Short interviews revealed that many visitors are aware of the British Museum's relation to colonialism, but the fact that majority of the Museum's galleries do not provide contextual information about the history of the collection make it highly unlikely that new visitors will learn of this crucial context. Then, the study honed in one specific special exhibit from 2016 to 2017— South Africa: The Art of a Nation— which focused on the deep historical issues regarding colonialism and apartheid, a political approach to exposing these facts. The general public response to this was that most visitors found the exhibition to be controversial by nature, but found that this would be necessary to address these difficult issues. The exhibition overall prompted reflection upon European colonialism, and exposed many to this history. However, the higher prices resulted in overall less diverse audiences and a significantly lower turnout than the British Museum's permanent galleries. The overall conclusion that Frost comes to is that it is necessary for proper evaluation of effective methods in educating the public on contextual subject matter and to apply these methods to the more general and more frequently visited galleries. Many frequent museum goers also commonly felt that the British Museum's expansive collection would not likely participate in repatriation, and while not necessarily in support of this, believed the Museum has a role as a custodian of cultures. The Museum's role in preserving artifacts is viewed as a positive by people who fall into this category, and they view that it is necessary to accept the lack of future restitution. However, the research also showed that many young people refuse to go to museums due to emotional effects as a result of correlations to colonial looting. Frost finds it important for labels and descriptions of objects with

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<sup>11</sup> Curry, Andrew. "TROUBLED TREASURES: RETURNING STOLEN LOOT ISN'T CLOSING MUSEUMS. IT'S OPENING NEW DOORS." *National Geographic*, March 2023, 34+. *Gale OneFile: High School Edition* (accessed May 25, 2024).

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contested colonial histories to stray from the traditional neutral voice, and incorporate more accurate interpretations.

Frost's source proved extremely helpful in my understanding of how the British Museum has been generally perceived in the public's knowledge, and showed that the majority of museum goers are aware of the colonial history of Britain, but there are clearly differing opinions on what the Museum should be obligated to do regarding restitution. Free-admission temporary displays can allow new perceptions of artifacts to develop. While many have stated that the British Museum has been a way for education on worldwide cultures, it is still apparent that many have an outright refusal to endorse any aspect of the Museum due to the colonial history associated with it. I find that this source most deeply aided me in my research on aspects regarding the general perspectives of those who are not directly affiliated with stolen art and property. This was in contrast to my other sources, which primarily took in accounts from people who have connections to the art and its restitution. This allowed me to gain more insight into the general opinions, and finding that many resonated with similar views put me a step closer to answering my research question.

This research has notably given me a much wider understanding of the very current and ever-updating dilemma regarding stolen objects as a result of European colonialism. While I initially focused on the Benin Bronzes, which obtain wide media coverage as some of the most contested artifacts, I also delved into the territory of contested objects such as the Mandu Yenu, which also hold controversial background, despite its less public media presence. Gbadamosi and Curry both illustrated current circumstances in which artifacts are circulating the media, and Curry additionally delved into circumstances of restitution in America, which has proved overall successful. In the ABC documentary, reporter Allan Clarke spotlighted two current individuals who are actively seeking restitution, showcasing the activism and art done by Diyabanza and Mivekannin, respectively. This led me to understand that the current action done by European governments is not nearly enough for the African countries and tribes to feel reunited with their lost culture. The fact that jobs such as traditional African bronze casting are considered a dying art makes restitution even more meaningful, and I found that that account truly showed the need for immediate restitution. All my sources provided me with substantial information, conveying the various aspects of why restitution is necessary. I found that my final source, the study conducted by Frost, was especially helpful in tying all my sources together and providing a perspective from the public. With so many people being aware of European colonial history, along with some refusing to go to museums because of it, it may be true that some museums are even losing revenue due to their association with colonial history. If I were to conduct further research on this topic, I would like to see if there was further research done to determine the amount of revenue museums, especially the British Museum, gain as a result of exhibits dedicated to artifacts from previously colonized countries.

Overall, my research has truly enlightened me upon the varying perspectives and opinions regarding restitution of stolen art, and my sources have shown me the effects of the colonization that has taken place. Because of the evident negative consequences that displaced cultural artifacts have on their place of origin and people who have ancestral ties to the objects, I find that the overarching conclusion I have come to based on my research is that museums should take part in restitution when it is known that the objects were taken by force. In cases in which the objects were agreed upon or given to the colonial party, it is still crucial to treat the artifacts with care and display them with the intent in which they were originally made for. Museums must also display any objects that have a contested history alongside proper



identification and context, so that museum goers are able to understand the historical significance and controversy surrounding them. Museums should also take into account the effect that contested objects have on their revenue, and understand the negative implications that such history has put alongside their reputation. It is essential for museums that display culturally significant artifacts to recognize the history and heritage that has been damaged due to colonization.

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