

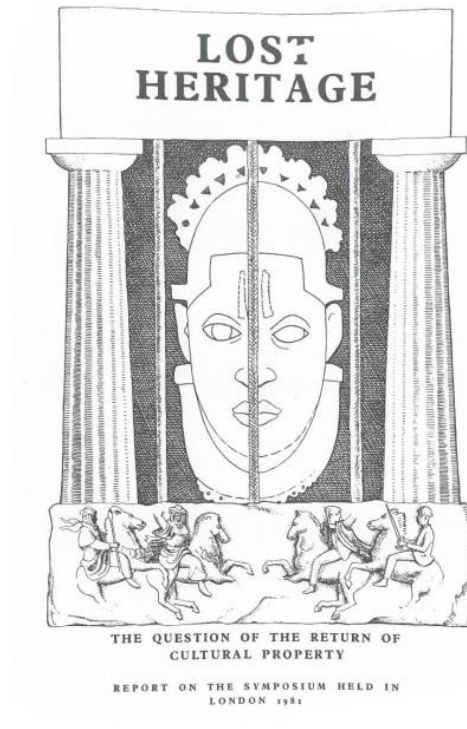
Institutional Objects on Display—Remaining? OR Restituted?

Introduction

Back in the early Seventies, I attended a lecture by a Harvard Fogg Museum curator. He opened his trench coat revealing multiple pockets, gleefully telling the audience, he wore the coat when stealing antiquities.

With Twenty-First Century Formalism cemented to Conceptualism, thanks to Duchamp and his urinal (*Fountain*, 1917) becoming art, we now consider museum objects, for their external Form and original functionality. Institutional changes come from odd circumstances. Michael Fried's Sixties essay, *Art and Objecthood*, sparred with early Conceptualism embedded into Donald Judd's Minimalism. Fried's insistence that Minimalism was 'theatrical' ironically paved the way for museum-goers to acquire broader perspectives, leading to--where does an artefact belong? In this post-Covid era, citizens protest outside museums questioning: who deserves to sit on boards, gender inequality in the workplace, demands for higher pay, and also Restitution. (Harrison).

Today #1



Book Cover: Report on the London Symposium, Lost Heritage, 1981 (Savoy, plate 8)

At a May 1981, London conference at the Africa Centre, where Restitution got noticed, it was announced, “The British Museum is a universal museum....the museum is not a mirror of national identity but a reflection of the universal heritage of man (Savoy, 111).” This past summer the British Museum dismissed curator, Peter Higgs, who allegedly stole/sold artifacts on eBay for apparently pocket change. Soon, Director, Hartwig Fischer was dismissed. Martin Bailey writes, the British Museum, “faces its most damaging crisis since the Second World War (*Art Newspaper* Bailey, 9/27/23). Recently, it was revealed that some 2,000 gems went missing over the past 20-25 years, while 2,400,000 objects are imperfectly catalogued (*Art Newspaper*, Bailey, 10/19/2023). In 2021, Danish gem dealer, Ittai Gradel, told the British Museum their stones were showing up on eBay. Jonathan Williams the deputy director [who also would be

fired] told Gradel all gems were accounted for, while Fischer told a trustee, “the matter was closed (Alex Marshall, *NYTimes*, 8/22/23).”



Euphronios Krater in the Archeological Museum of Cerveteri, Italy

Institutional or individual looting from ancient cultures is not new and continues, in spite of a ‘1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property’. And throughout the final decades of the Twentieth Century, the Getty and other museums escalated the buying of ancient Greek and Roman objects, with little regard for where they came from, or who had the authority to sell. Private jets flew to hideaway villas and luxury yachts for secret deals. Curators who engaged in nefarious negotiations often shifted tactics, pretending to be on the side of UNESCO (Felch/Frammolino, 140, 311). At the end of the Twentieth Century, collectors and museums began getting caught. When former Metropolitan director (1959-1977) Thomas Hoving, who had purchased the infamous Euphronios Krater in 1972, left to become Editor of *Connoisseur Magazine* (1981-1991), he began publishing, in 1987, “a series of devastating investigative articles revealing the Getty’s secrets (Felch/Frammolino, 19, 75, 82).” *Los Angeles Times*

Felch/Frammolino write, “Between- 2005-2010, American, European and Japanese museums returned [hundreds of] objects to Italy and Greece, including Hoving’s Euphronios Krater (Felch/Frammolino, 321).”

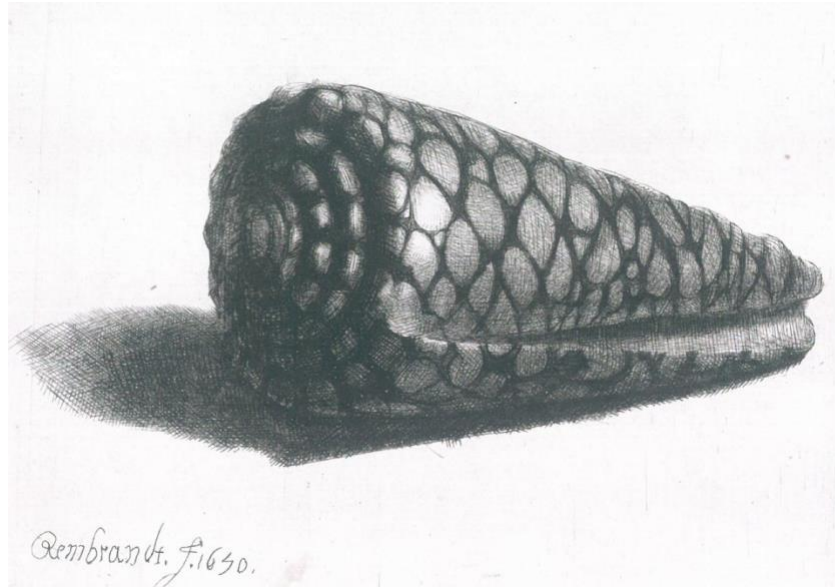


Museum-Goers at the British Museum flock to see Parthenon Marbles, Photo by Jean Bundy

Last May, at the British Museum, I chatted with museum-goers enjoying the iconic space, eateries, and shops. Even if tourists are not savvy to art’s historical canon, most were cognizant of wars, earthquakes, floods, and fires that have destroyed many heritage sites; and when asked prefer the supposed safety of universal museums, rather than returning artefacts to so-called unstable regions. Former Getty director James Cuno writes, “encyclopedic museums are cosmopolitan institutions... that by gathering and presenting examples of the world’s diverse artistic cultures ‘under one roof’, work to dissipate ignorance and superstition about the world and promote tolerance of difference itself (Cuno, 8).” Oxford’s Dan Hicks disagrees, “The terms ‘universal museum’ or ‘encyclopedic museum’ were virtually never employed until the later 20th century.” The definition was originally purposed to justify displaying

industrial/applied/decorative arts adjacent to paintings/sculpture, and not to define collections from different global cultures. Hicks insists universal museums are, “a self-appointed ‘group’ of privileged museums...promoting the Western world’s dominance and monopoly of interpretation over other peoples’ cultures and colonization (Hicks, 202,203,204).” Of note: “the Louvre Abu Dhabi opened in November 2017, billed as ‘the first universal museum of the Arab world, complete with a bronze Oba head looted in 1897 as part of its founding collection (Hicks, 213).”

Backstory



Rembrandt, The Shell, 1650, Rijksmuseum

Humanity likes to collect junk. Sea shells collected on beaches or sold in resorts, were once an extravagance. Historian Anne Goldgar writes, “the early modern fervor for shells as prized possessions from foreign lands was founded on a long history of trade and, ultimately, imperial and colonial exploitation (*Conchophilia*, 3).” Thanks to Marilyn Monroe’s appearance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) we think of diamonds as a girl’s best friend, but once pearls

were all the rage. The ‘Pendant with a Monstrous Pearl in the form of a Madonna’ (1640-50) crafted by a Netherlandish artist, belonged to Catholic Spain’s Philip II, who considered it God’s will that he profit from the Spanish Indies. Today, this bauble is just an allegory to Philip’s ‘Atlantic pearl industry’ and the everlasting devastation it caused (*Picture Ecology*, 80-81).



Pendant with a Monstrous Pearl, Netherlandish Artist, ca. 1640-50, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

It was Napoleon’s plundering, which filled the Louvre and provided a template for Western museums. Harvard’s David Joselit writes, “the nationalization of large amounts of art taken from aristocratic and church collections within France framed the reorganization of the Louvre as a massive act of restitution: a kind of repatriation of France’s patrimony, seized from its secular and ecclesiastical elites and given to its people (Joselit, 20-21).”

The Nineteenth Century Industrial Revolution propelled by fuel manufactured from the whaling trade, escalated acquisitions of raw materials: cloth and minerals from exotic places. While Western factories were early evidence of Climate Change as seen in Monet’s foggy

impressions or Turner's coal fired trains, 'Colonialism' was the overarching narrative, a network that not only enabled this so-called progress, but allowed for European and American financial exploitation (Shields). This included looting from powerless dependencies by unprincipled dealings. Originally crafted for practical or spiritual purposes, objects were stolen or undersold, later to be bought for speculation or aesthetic trophies.

Today #2

While most who excavate are still laborers, in 1961, Michael Rockefeller disappeared while collecting artefacts in New Guinea. In 1982, the Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Wing of the Metropolitan opened with hundreds of Oceanic objects the family acquired. (Lena 62-63). His father, Nelson Rockefeller declared, "Don't ask me whether this bowl I am holding is a household implement or a ritual vessel. I could not care less (Lena, 48)." Wealthy collectors, who treat craft as fine art, have helped dispel the idea that craftsmanship is inferior. However, completely ignoring an object's original purpose and region, render the piece physiologically worthless, which provides more excuses not to return artefacts.

Perhaps this is why encyclopedic museums cater to the public, who seek amusement park entertainment. Of Note: The Metropolitan announced it will be destroying its wood-paneled book shop near its Fifth Avenue entrance, relocating merchandise to its fluorescent-tubed basement, repurposing the book store for costumes, which the public prefers (*Art Newspaper*, Sutton, 10/03/23). Cuno writes, "Why do people come to museums...in such great numbers? It is...because they hunger to have their world enlarged, their life enriched by the experience of new and strange, wonderful things, and sense made of the differences they confront in the polyglot, multiethnic world in which they live (Cuno, 9)."



Asante Jug, late 14th Century, British Museum, London, 1896

In the universal museum some artefacts will politically remain, while others get pressured to go home. Perplexities do pop-up. An ‘Ashante Jug’ made in Fourteenth Century England, turned up in West Africa, where it morphed into a Native talisman, only to be seized as plunder and returned to England after the Anglo-Ashanti War (1896). Whether it belongs in Africa or England is debatable. (Cooke, 149-151).



Woman trying on Kimono at Boston's MFA, show: Flirting with the Exotic, 2015

What if a culture is metaphorically seized? 'Japonisme', was popular in the late Nineteenth Century; and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* (1885) is still performed. The Japanese exhibition- *Flirting with the Exotic* (2015) was accompanied by kimonos, which visitors could try-on. One was copied from Monet's *La Japonaise* (1876). There were no objections when the show toured Japan. But, when it got to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the public decried, "This exhibit activity reaffirms the notion that Asian-identified folk are the Other, that they do not exist here, and that their cultures' histories with oppressive practices are mere entertainment fodder." Trying-on and taking selfies immediately stopped. However, Japan's Deputy Consul General for Boston countered, "We actually do not quite understand what their point of protest is" (Lena, 123-124). Not everyone imagines Restitution in the same way.

Since World War II, the identification and return of Nazi plunder, continues to be news. The public may not pay attention to what resides ethically in museums, but it's attuned to

Hollywood. The film *Monuments Men* (2014) with George Clooney brought Nazi looting into theaters and homes via the internet, enlightening the public, oblivious to World War II histories beyond earlier fantastical movies with stars like John Wayne. The movie *Woman in Gold* (2015) with Helen Mirren dramatized the struggle and eventual return of the ‘Adele Bloch-Bauer I’ Klimt portrait, highlighting the need for more in depth Restitution. The short film- *You Hide Me* (1971) by Ghanaian, film director, Nii Kwate Owoo, rediscovered thanks to YouTube, and only given a day to shoot, revealed the vast amount of artefacts hoarded in the British Museum’s basement, not accessible to the public (Savoy, 11-15,107).”



Beyond Van Gogh, The Van Gogh Immersive Experience, Immersive

Smart Phones: arm museum-goers with instant research and ability to photograph and store hundreds of objects, allowing for more ‘theatricality’ than Fried ever imagined. Joselit updates, “The auratic mystique of the artwork is not diminished but doubly *deferred* for future use—as a kind of credit. It is literally placed in storage in the memory of electronic devices to be consulted later or put into circulation as a form of cultural capital through its distribution on

social media (Joselit, xiv).” Chidirim Nwaubani and Ahmed Abokor, who founded Looty (2021) developed software, which allows visitors to Egypt, to stand where the Rosetta Stone was thought to have been discovered, point Smartphones at a QR Code and witness a “digitally repatriated” artefact. (Farah Nayeri, *NYTimes*, 8/11/23).” So if electronic devices give tourists, who lunch and ‘exit through the gift shop’ endless pleasure, maybe this explains why many don’t care about, where an artefact and its original purpose derived, or whether it gets returned? Consider the Van Gogh’ Immersive Experience’ where his enlarged projected paintings circulate in convention halls. Do images seen by huge crowds, not necessarily art aficionados, weaken original intent, or detract from a greater Restitution push?

OK-Which Proves More Practical?



Portrait of Mai, Reynolds, 1776, National Gallery, London & The Getty Center, Los Angeles

Co-owning: The National Portrait Gallery, London entered into co-ownership with the Getty and bought-‘Portrait of Mai (Omai) (1776)’ by Joshua Reynolds, as each contributed £25 million, and will share exhibition time (*Art Newspaper*, Cole & Smith, 6/16/ 2023). Restitution reverses: In 1773, Mai voluntarily sailed with Capt. Cook, French Polynesia to London, becoming bi-lingual and amusement for the aristocracy. In 1777, he freely returned, and built a miniature English estate (Hough 307).

Loaning: The British Museum routinely appears in the tabloids for dragging its feet about returning the Parthenon Marbles, on display since 1817. In spite of the museum’s recent administrative debacles, secret talks involving a loan/exchange continue (*Art Newspaper*, Seymour, 12/5/22 & Harris 8/28/23).” A stumbling block maybe the updated ‘British Parliament Act of 1963’, that states, “henceforth, the museum was prohibited, almost without exception, of disposing of its holdings (Savoy, 6).”

Returning: Some Benin Bronzes, seized during the Anglo-Ashanti War (1896) have been returned. Recently, the Nigerian government recognized the Oba of Benin as owner of all looted artefacts; so whether this will snag future negotiations is unknown (*Art Newspaper*, Harris 4/26/23 & Hickley, 5/12/23). Director of Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments ,Abba Isa Tijani, writes, “The Nigerian government commented, “ It’s shocking to hear that the countries and museums that have been telling us that the Benin Bronzes would not be secure in Nigeria, have thefts happening there (Harris, *Art Newspaper* 8/25/23).”



Mask, Culture Sugpiaq, 19th Century, Musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer, France

Sharing: There is unique mask sharing between the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak, Alaska and the Musée-Boulogne-Sur-Mer in Northern France. In 1871-1872, French ethnographer, Alphonse Pinart (1852-1911) spent six months on Kodiak where he was given masks, which he donated to the Musée-Boulogne-Sur-Mer. After extensive negotiations, thirty-four old masks flew to Alaska for the show: *Giinaquq: Like a Face--Sugpiaq Masks of the Kodiak Archipelago*, 2008, (Journeys, 5). Contemporary mask maker, Perry Eaton recounts, “It was ground breaking from a European museum perspective. No museum wants to loan objects to Indigenous peoples because they fear once they travel to their original home, they would never be returned....The working relationship between [Musée-Boulogne-Sur-Mer and the Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak] has been studied by other European museums. (emails: Eaton to Bundy).”

Conclusion

Formalism with Conceptualism gave museum artefacts back their heritage: narratives and purposes beyond mere beauty. Although the Other's art can reside next to Western works, who has permission to use/copy an Other's culture, is routinely challenged. Acknowledging an object as a sign of wrongdoing, whether it remains in the West, gets Restituted, or even shows up on social media, begin healing processes, even if many issues remain unresolved.

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