

MAY 2010

**CULTURAL
ARTEFACTS**

**DAVID BOWDEN &
JAMES GLEDHILL**



**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“WESTERN MUSEUMS
SHOULD AGREE TO
REQUESTS TO
REPATRIATE
CULTURAL
ARTEFACTS”**

CONTENTS

Introduction

Key terms

The cultural artefacts debate in context

Essential reading

Backgrounders

In the news

INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

NOTES

1 How should we adjudicate between competing claims to cultural artefacts? Advocates of repatriation argue that disputed artefacts are best understood and appreciated in the context of their place of origin and that many artefacts are central to the culture, traditions and identity of indigenous communities. Opponents

2 argue that Western museums must defend their collections, based on the principle that artefacts from diverse cultures should

4 be available to be viewed and studied by the widest possible audience. Prominent artefacts like the Elgin/Parthenon marbles [Ref: [BBC](#)], the Benin Bronzes [Ref: [BBC News](#)] and the Rosetta Stone [Ref: [Independent](#)] have been the focus of longstanding

5 controversy.

6

More recently the focus of attention has expanded to include human remains and sacred objects, initiating a debate about culture as the basis of claims to repatriation. The issues at stake include the role of museums in shaping knowledge and understanding and the extent to which contemporary society can and should right the perceived historical wrongs of the past.

KEY TERMS

[Elgin/Parthenon marbles](#)

[Restitution](#)

[Universal museum](#)

What is the role of museums?

Many museums were founded in the nineteenth century in order to assemble and curate encyclopaedic collections of objects that would offer comprehensive knowledge of the world. In our post-colonial era it has been argued that this role is no longer so clear and straightforward. Museums have become involved in a debate about which values should take priority: principles of universal understanding and academic research or the need to respect the cultural context and source communities from which artefacts originate.

Who owns culture?

The British Museum and other museums like it argue they exist to promote universal understanding and that this requires maintaining the integrity of their collections [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. On this basis, such museums claim to be ‘universal museums’ [Ref: [ICOM](#)], which represent the global cultural heritage of humankind and transcend national and cultural boundaries by allowing visitors to compare and contrast artefacts from many different cultures [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. Opponents question this idea, which they say is undermined when used as an excuse for dismissing repatriation claims. Local communities should have the right to preserve their own histories and traditions, which was often denied to them under colonial rule [Ref: [Museum and Society](#)].

What are the arguments for the repatriation of cultural artefacts?

Advocates argue that repatriation contributes towards making reparations for historical wrongs, that disputed artefacts are

best understood and appreciated in the context of their place of origin and that many artefacts are central to the culture, traditions and identity of indigenous communities. In the case of the Parthenon marbles, advocates of repatriation argue that these artefacts have been wrenched from their rightful place and that they need to be seen in the context of the Parthenon to be properly appreciated [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In other instances, it is strongly argued that indigenous communities should choose how their history is shared. Some museums believe that successful acts of repatriation can symbolise our common humanity, building relationships with indigenous communities and right historical wrongs [Ref: [Scotsman](#)].

On what grounds is the retention of collections defended?

Opponents of repatriation suggest that the belief that artefacts are best appreciated in their place of origin undermines the very function of a museum. Collecting objects necessarily involves an act of separation. This is valuable since by placing artefacts in a new context they take on an added significance, becoming one thread in the broad tapestry of human civilization [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. These artefacts can be vital objects of study into human civilisations, just as research into equally contested human remains provides insights into patterns of migration and evolution, the effects of diet and disease and the influence of climate. Moreover, it is argued, arguments for repatriation imply a narrow and parochial understanding of the human imagination in suggesting that cultural artefacts can only properly be understood by those of that culture, rather than humanity as a whole.

Righting past wrongs?

While there is a technical and legal argument over ownership, it is important to recognise that what is at stake in this discussion are competing interpretations of Enlightenment values.

Advocates for repatriation contend that by holding on to these 'spoils of war' Western museums continue to benefit from and therefore validate their colonial legacy [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and that through repatriation we can offer reparations for past misdeeds [Ref: [New Republic](#)]. Yet others contend that the politics of culture are always complex and change as societies develop [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Modern Greece is very different from the nation which existed in the nineteenth century, for example, let alone Ancient Greece: so who can we rightfully return these artefacts to? Other critics observe that the contemporary demands for restitution are driven more by contemporary political grievances [Ref: [New York Times](#)] and problems and that giving in to an understandable desire to right the wrongs of the past will distract from, and do little to challenge, the current problems various wronged groups face [Ref: [Art Newspaper](#)].

ESSENTIAL READING

Newshour: James Cuno debate with Christopher Hitchens on Parthenon Marbles

Princeton University Press blog 4 August 2009

Britain enriched by Africa's looted art

Toyin Agbetu *Guardian* 21 April 2007

Britain is at the centre of a conversation with the world

Neil MacGregor *Guardian* 19 April 2007

No place like home

Jim Gilchrist *Scotsman* 31 January 2007

FOR

Time for the Antiquities to Return Home

Zahi Hawass *Asharq Alawsat* 17 December 2009

A Home for the Marbles

Christopher Hitchens *New York Times* 18 June 2009

Ill-gotten gains should be repatriated

Leo Hickman *Guardian Comment is free* 3 March 2009

End the exile

Neal Ascherson *Observer* 20 June 2004

AGAINST

When ancient artifacts become political pawns

Michael Kimmelman *New York Times* 23 October 2009

The time has come for a statute of limitations

Sir Norman Rosenthal *Art Newspaper* December 2008

James Cuno: 'Culture knows no political borders'

Tiffany Jenkins *Spectator* 16 July 2008

Honour amongst thieves

Philip Hensher *Guardian* 24 April 2006

IN DEPTH

Found and Lost

Ingrid D. Rowland *New Republic* 24 September 2008

Heritage wars

David Lowenthal *spiked* 16 March 2006

Enlightenment museums: Universal or merely global?

Mark O'Neill *Museum and Society* November 2004

The whole world in our hands

Neil MacGregor *Guardian* 24 July 2004

4 of 6

NOTES



BACKGROUNDEERS

A History of the World in 100 Objects

BBC Radio 4 2010

The Big Question: What is the Rosetta Stone, and should Britain return it to Egypt?

Cahal Milmo *Independent* 9 December 2009

The Lovely Stone

Christopher Hitchens *Vanity Fair* July 2009

Behind the scenes at the British Museum

Bryan Appleyard *The Sunday Times* 6 May 2007

The Parthenon Sculptures: the position of the Trustees of the British Museum

British Museum 21 April 2007

Should Africa reclaim its stolen treasures?

BBC News 13 May 2005

The artefacts of life

Guardian 13 January 2005

Who owns culture?

BBC Radio 4's Analysis 29 July 2004

The restitution of the Parthenon marbles

Hellenic Ministry of Culture

The Parthenon Sculptures in the British Museum, Athens and other public collections

British Museum

The Parthenon marbles

Guardian Unlimited Special Report

5 of 6

NOTES

ORGANISATIONS

American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation

British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon

Marbles

European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights (ENIAR)

Supreme Council of Antiquities

IN THE NEWS

Countries list priceless relics they want returned

China Post 10 April 2010

Egypt hosts meeting on recovery of 'stolen treasures'

BBC News 7 April 2010

Lewis chessmen must stay in British Museum, ministers say

Scotsman 11 March 2010

MPs angered by 'Norwegian' chessmen

The Times 24 February 2010

France returns ancient relics from the Louvre to Egypt

France 24 15 December 2009

UK museums can return looted art

BBC News 13 November 2009

Greece urges return of sculptures

BBC News 21 June 2009

Greek government unveils new home for Elgin marbles

Daily Telegraph 11 May 2009

Aboriginal remains return to Tasmania after 20-year fight

Guardian 12 May 2007

Talks held on Elgin Marbles row

BBC News 10 May 2007

Row over Nefertiti bust continues

BBC News 7 May 2007

Totem returned to Canadian tribe

BBC News 14 March 2006

Ceding art to Italy, Met avoids showdown

International Herald Tribune 21 February 2006

Obelisk arrives back in Ethiopia

BBC News 19 April 2005

Returns policy

Scotsman 22 January 2005

Egypt calls for return of Rosetta Stone

BBC News 21 July 2003

Museums thwart artefact claims

BBC News 9 December 2002

Benin bronzes sold to Nigeria

BBC News 27 March 2002

6 of 6

NOTES



ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

FIND OUT MORE

Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

Debating Matters Competition
Academy of Ideas Ltd
Signet House
49-51 Farringdon Road
London
EC1M 3JP

- Yes, I'd like to know more. Please send me further information about the Debating Matters Competition:
- I am a teacher and would like further details about events in my area and how to enter a team
- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/
organisation

Professional role
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone

**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

