



UK Museums Ought to be Cautious When They Wish for Reparation

We all know the museum that has the most artefacts from around the globe: The British Museum. And now we have a similar situation on hand. There are a lot of countries asking the UK authorities to return their countries' cultural artefacts which represent their heritage.

The Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum's director, Tristram Hunt, has put himself in a bowl of soup. A 3rd-century head of 'Eros' that had previously been in the V&A Museum was returned to the sarcophagus from which it had been removed in the 19th century. Hunt advised initiating a debate about the restrictions that make it challenging for UK museums to return artefacts in their collections to their countries of origin.

A collaboration between the V&A and the Turkish government, under which the head is still the V&A's property but is on long-term loan, allowed for the repatriation of Eros. The National Heritage Act of 1983 forbids the trustees of national institutions like the V&A and Tate from deaccessioning items from their collections unless they are duplicates or damaged beyond repair, thus it has to be this way.



There is clearly rising debate regarding the notion that universal museums will serve as the permanent custodians of artefacts from throughout the world, many of which were acquired reluctantly, thanks to the British Colonisation. But there are a few countries that are mending their past; as demonstrated by the agreement made in Berlin on July 1st for the transfer of ownership to Nigeria of some 1,100 objects. President Macron in France has recognised the political benefits of cooperation over returns to former French colonies, albeit more recently, it appears that his ardour for restitution is dwindling.

Hunt's appearance with Today made it plain that he believes decisions on commonly mentioned problems of these artefacts, should be left to the trustees of the museum that is home to the item. However, he also made the argument that, in terms of the V&A, things were simpler when the museum was directly managed by the government, as opposed to when it was an organisation supported by the department of culture, as it is now.

Reference:

<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/tristram-hunt-restitution-uk-museums-law/>

