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## KEY TERMS

[Elgin/Parthenon Marbles](#)

[Encyclopaedic museum](#)

[Restitution](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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In October 2014, lawyer Amal Clooney made headlines by arguing that artefacts from the Parthenon in Athens, displayed in the British Museum since 1817 [Ref: [British Museum](#)], should be returned to Greece, stating that: “The Greek government has just cause and it’s time for the British Museum to recognise that and return the marbles to Greece. The injustice has persisted for too long” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Clooney’s statement, reflects a modern trend for the repatriation of artefacts and art, as well as human remains and sacred objects, to their place of origin. Although the Marbles remain the cause celebre in the controversy about repatriation of artefacts, there are many other contested objects [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. For instance Egypt’s chief archaeologist Zahi Hawass has demanded the return of the Nefertiti bust from the Neues Museum in Berlin, and secured the return of fresco fragments from the Louvre [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. A discussion about the care of cultural artefacts has also been brought to the fore recently due to the destruction of ancient world sites by Islamic State (ISIS). In March 2015 ISIS destroyed the ancient Assyrian archaeological site of Nimrud, in modern day Iraq, prompting outrage around the world [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. There was recent international concern about the fate of Palmyra in Syria [Ref: [Guardian](#)], with some arguing it would be “peculiarly catastrophic” were that ancient city to face the same fate as Nimrud [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], and in August Islamic State went on to destroy the largest ancient temple in Palmyra [Ref: [Algemeiner](#)]. These recent events involving cultural artefacts, it is argued, should serve as a “wake up call” to Western museums to be protective of their collections and unapologetic with regards to past disputes over contested remains. This is because “important antiquities should be treated as the common property of mankind” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] – a sentiment which has renewed the debate about the role of Western encyclopaedic museums [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] as repositories of global culture. On balance, do cultural artefacts belong in their country of origin, to be viewed and appreciated in the context in which they were made? Or are contested artefacts such as the Nefertiti bust part of a larger tapestry of world culture, which Western museums should keep, and preserve for us all?



# THE REPATRIATION OF ARTEFACTS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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## What is the role of museums?

Many of the world's most famous museums were founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collecting objects that would offer a comprehensive knowledge of the world. In our post-colonial era it has been argued that their role is no longer clear and straightforward. Museums find themselves in the middle of a debate about what should take priority: principles of universal understanding and academic research, where objects are curated together to tell "not just the history of the local or national parish, but all history, all learning, all human expression" [Ref: [The Times](#)]; or in contemporary society whether it is "...proper to remove a work from its original cultural setting, losing its context?" [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. The British Museum in London, and others, argue they exist to promote universal understanding of our shared human history, and that this requires maintaining the integrity of their existing collections [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. These encyclopaedic museums transcend national and cultural boundaries and that "culture, while it can have deeply rooted, special meanings to specific people, doesn't belong to anyone in the grand scheme of things. It doesn't stand still" [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. But critics of this outlook challenge the idea that such collections need to be housed in Western museums, because "world class museums are not held by some act of God to Northern Europe or North America" [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

## What are the arguments for the repatriation of cultural artefacts?

Advocates argue that repatriation of artefacts contributes towards making reparations for historical wrongs, and builds a new diplomacy between nations and people [Ref: [US News](#)]. Writer Helena Smith suggests that disputed artefacts are best understood and appreciated

in the context of their place of origin, stating that: "Every country has the right after all, to the heritage that is an inherent part of its cultural identity" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. She concludes, in relation to the Parthenon Marbles: "Ownership of objects is no longer important, and the Greeks are willing to put that issue aside...what is far more important is context, appreciating artworks in their places of birth" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. This view is supported by Ghanaian writer Kwame Opoku, who argues that: "Those Western museums and Governments that are busy proclaiming their wishes to celebrate with Nigeria and other African States...independence could follow their words with concrete actions by sending some African artefacts back to their countries of origin" [Ref: [Museum Security Network](#)]. Similarly, even some museums believe that successful acts of repatriation can symbolise our common humanity, building relationships with indigenous communities, and righting historical wrongs [Ref: [Austrian Government](#)]. Another aspect to the discussion is that many of the artefacts in question are contested, such as the Benin Bronzes [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], and supporters of repatriation contend that by holding on to these 'spoils of war' Western museums continue to benefit from, and therefore validate, their colonial legacy, with the Elgin Marbles in particular representing "a sad reminder of cultural imperialism" [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. "In the end" as one commentator opines "the defence for hanging onto contested cultural goods boils down to the deeply offensive notion that Britain looks after the Parthenon Marbles, or Benin Heads and plaques better than Greece or Nigeria ever could" [Ref: [Guardian](#)].



# THE REPATRIATION OF ARTEFACTS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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## On what grounds are the retention of collections defended?

Historian and curator James Cuno outlines the case against repatriation by arguing that culture is universal, and by mounting a robust defence cultures, encyclopaedic museums encourage curiosity about the world and its many people” [Ref: [Foreign Affairs](#)]. Art critic Jonathan Jones concurs, noting that placing artefacts in a new context gives them an added significance, “as part of humanity’s heritage” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] to be enjoyed by everyone. Moreover, “In our post-modern, post-nationalist world, it’s all about interaction and hybridisation, about celebrating the diverse cultural components that make up each of us...it means that the Parthenon Marbles are as much British as they are Greek” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. For some, arguments for repatriation are directly opposed to a universal understanding of culture – and exposes the trend for the explicit politicisation of culture and art, which leads to “divisive identity politics”, where it is assumed that “certain people have a special relationship to particular objects, owing to their ethnic identity” [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. Unfortunately, as one commentator laments: “Globalisation, it turns out has only intensified, not diminished cultural differences among nations”, as shown by governments now seeking to “exploit culture” for their own political purposes [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Moreover: “The idea that certain objects belong to certain ethnic groups is destructive, and obscures the universal nature of mankind, the fact that we can abstract ourselves from our particular circumstances and appreciate the creation of all human civilisations” [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. There are also practical problems involved in repatriation – for example, modern Greece is very different from the nation which existed in the nineteenth century, let alone Ancient Greece: so who would we rightfully return artefacts to? American critic Michael Kimmelman asks “why should any objects necessarily reside in the modern nation-state controlling the plot of land where, at one time,

perhaps thousands of years earlier, they came from?” [Ref: [New York Times](#)].

## Who owns culture?

Contemporary demands for restitution, some argue, are driven by contemporary political grievances and that giving in to an understandable desire to right the wrongs of the past via the repatriation of objects will distract from, and do little to challenge, the problems historically wronged groups face today [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Arguably, the very meaning and purpose of museums is at stake in this debate, with some arguing that “perhaps it is time for museums to start speaking up for civilisation” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and asking whether humanity’s cultural heritage belongs to just some of us, or all of us, and how we might best protect, share and understand it. Other commentators suggest demands for the return of famous artefacts, such as the bust of Nefertiti, are far more utilitarian, and reflect economic realities: “Tourism is an important moneymaker for Egypt...(accounting) for 11.5 percent of total employment in Egypt. Each year in Berlin, some 500,000 visitors flock to see the bust of Neferiti” [Ref: [Newsweek](#)]. So how should we view cultural artefacts, and how do we decide who owns or displays them? Are they best seen as universal objects housed in predominantly Western museums which embody “openness, tolerance, and inquiry about the world, along with the recognition that culture exists independent of nationalism” [Ref: [Foreign Affairs](#)]? Or should these contested artefacts, be returned to their points of origin, allowing the works to be housed and perhaps better understood in their original context, because ultimately, “museums need to face up to a reality. Cultural imperialism is dead. They cannot any longer coldly keep hold of artistic treasures that were acquired in dubious circumstances a long time ago” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]?

