

## The Issue of Returning Colonial Artefacts

Most artefacts in large museums of international significance are a result of imperialism, looting in war or colonialism. The looting of countries artefacts for display is an ancient practice, for example, the ancient Romans displayed the obelisk from Egypt at chariot races. Recently, there has been a debate about the role of museums and whether they have a right to keep the objects they are housing or should return them to their countries of origin (repatriation). There are many arguments for and against repatriation. In 2007, the UN passed the declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples, which urged member states to restore “cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property” taken from indigenous people without their “free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs”.

The role of museums is to preserve objects of cultural importance, and they have the financing and infrastructure to preserve historical artefacts. Museums also play an important role in making information accessible to the public and promoting tolerance and wider cultural understanding. Museums are located in cosmopolitan cities such as London, Paris, Berlin, Rome or New York, and if the artworks were to be moved, they would be seen by far fewer people. For example, if the Rosetta Stone were to be moved from The British Museum to The Cairo Museum, the number of people, who view it, would drop from about 5.5 million visitors to 2.5 million visitors a year.

On the other hand, these western museums are inaccessible to the people whose culture they house and were originally created simply to deposit colonial artefacts and represent ownership and defeat of a culture, upholding colonial structures. Reparation could help Indigenous communities renew traditional practices that were previously lost, returning art and artefacts that have cultural importance to the community. Many do not believe that art is a part of universal human history and instead has been co-opted into a western historical narrative and therefore belongs to the countries of origin.

Recently, Austria has set up an expert panel to develop guideline for repatriating colonial loot; it is the first of its kind. The Viennese government has already agreed to return human remains to New Zealand and Hawaii, although Austria was not a colonial power, its museums contain a large collection of colonial artefacts. Committee members are from Namibia, France, Holland, Austria and Germany.

Similarly, the Netherlands’ National Museum of World Cultures pledged proactively to return all artefacts within its collection identified as stolen during the colonial era

### Points to consider

- Does your country have museums that hold colonial artefacts?
- Has your country been looted as a result of colonialism?
- Has your country previously demanded their artefacts, and has that demand been granted?
- How can we continue to preserve artefacts of cultural and historical importance?



### Useful links

- [The Netherlands: Museums confront the country's colonial past \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org)
- [Fight Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org)
- [Repatriation \(cultural property\) - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)