**[Decolonising the museum](https://www.dawn.com/news/1799343/decolonising-the-museum)**

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IT is sad that a visit to many of the most famous museums in the world feels like a visit to the treasure trove of a global looter. When one visits the British Museum, for instance, giant stone sculptures stolen from Easter Island, also known as Rapa Nui, are there to greet all visitors. The Ishtar Gate, which once guarded the entrance to the ancient city of Babylon, is not in Iraq but in Berlin at the Pergamon Museum. On more than one occasion, the government of Iraq has officially asked for it to be returned, but its demand has fallen on deaf ears. In the subcontinent, the story of the Kohinoor diamond is well known even though it is just one of the many objects and artifacts that were looted by the British and taken back to Britain before they left India.

In the past few years, however, the movement to have all these stolen goods returned to the countries from where they were looted has gained ground. Many scholars in the West have turned their attention to art theft and the issue of ‘provenance’ or how a particular institution managed to procure a piece for its collection has begun to be discussed. Some have pointed out how museums have circumvented the issue of illegal procurement by encouraging a wealthy donor to acquire an object and then displaying it with the label ‘from the collection of XYZ’ so that the museum itself does not have to disclose how the object was obtained. This applies to objects that were stolen on the art black market or during the colonial era.

Recently, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art announced it would be returning more than a dozen art objects reported to have been supplied by an art dealer and collector who was running a worldwide antiquities trafficking ring. Most of the sculptures will be returned to Cambodia and a few to Thailand. The ancient statues were part of the collection of British art dealer and collector Douglas Latchford. Many appear to have been taken out of Cambodia during the rule of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Art objects often become the subject of looting or illegal trade during periods of political tumult when competing parties or the fog of war obscure what is happening in cultural institutions.

Latchford was finally indicted for the theft of these and many other objects in 2019. However, he conveniently died the next year and so was never convicted and brought to justice. His heirs in the Latchford family admitted that the collection had hundreds of pieces of ancient Khmer objects and pieces of jewellery, which were reported to have been returned to Cambodia. It is very likely all these were procured by Latchford, whose dealings spanned the course of several decades. Other than ancient jewellery, there were statues of the Buddha, including one rare one referred to as the Head of the Buddha.

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The subject of art theft and the return of looted objects has started to reach the highest levels. A meeting between Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his British counterpart Rishi Sunak was cancelled because the latter learned that Mitsotakis was going to raise the issue of the stolen Elgin Marbles that were taken from the site of the Parthenon by the British and whose return the Greeks have been demanding for several decades. In an interview with the BBC, the Greek prime minister said, “This is not a question of returning artefacts … this is not an ownership question, this is a reunification argument”, going on to provocatively indicate that the Parthenon without the marbles was like the Mona Lisa torn in half.

As for the British Museum itself, it set up a website asking for the public’s help in addressing the question of hundreds of objects, mainly “gems and jewellery” dating from the 15th century BC, that had gone missing from its collection. Unsurprisingly, it focused largely on theft from its own stock rather than colonialist looting. It has now concluded an investigation.

The museum has also raised issues related to procurement but, tellingly, those relating to a narrow window of time from the 1930s to the end of World War II. These procurement problems are issues around art theft by the Nazis, who took over many European capitals and thus the objects in them. The British were the ‘good’ guys in that conflict and so it is convenient for the museum to position itself as a do-gooder trying to repatriate items back to European capitals following the consequences of Nazi looting.

Of course, one would like to ask about Britain’s long presence in the subcontinent and the thousands of objects that were looted either from excavations or directly from various royal kingdoms. British officers had access to some or other bit of subcontinental history and took it back with them where it hangs in the drawing rooms of their great grandchildren as the proud spoils of the time when they ruled India.

For those who may worry that returned objects may be stolen again if they are returned to countries from where they came there is little to be concerned about. This sort of theft is already underway at the British Museum itself, as indicated by the launch of its website enlisting the public’s support for the recovery of precious items. Some months ago, the curator for Greek and Roman art at the museum was fired over allegations of theft.

The question of the past has left an imprint on the present. While the return of certain objects may only be symbolic, it matters because it represents at least a tacit admission of the fact that colonialism was by and large a looting enterprise which sought to steal the wealth and treasure of one part of the world for the enrichment and enjoyment of another. All the objects that are in question, from the Kohinoor diamond to the Benin Bronzes to the Ishtar Gate, represent this truth.

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