

Bring Them Home

The magic of museums is that they transport visitors both back in time and across continents. Museums preserve some of the most priceless treasures in the world and give many people an opportunity to view wonders they would never otherwise have seen. However, take a moment to ponder how often these artifacts from around the globe come to reside in a museum far away from the country of their origin. Most often, museums acquire objects with full cooperation from the originating country, either accepting them as donations or purchasing them outright. In addition, many museums sponsor “traveling exhibits,” which means that they share their exhibits with other museums located all over the world. Unfortunately, however, there are a number of examples where museums acquired artifacts and other treasures that belong to another culture or country.

This is not to say that the museums intentionally stole these precious artifacts. In many cases, protecting the artifacts motivated the acquisition. For example, the stunning marble sculptures that once adorned the Parthenon temple in Greece were removed in the 1800s and transported to the British Museum to preserve them from further damage. The Turkish government, which then controlled Greece, gave permission for this undertaking. However, Greece has long since regained its independence and now has urgently petitioned the British Museum to return this historic art. Greece is eager to undertake the preservation of these priceless marble sculptures. In fact, a new Greek museum has a special room designed to house these statues in the hope that the country’s wishes and rights will be honored.

Like Greece, Egypt also wants to recover its historical treasures. The country is negotiating with France, England, Germany, the United States, and other countries for the return of priceless pieces of its history. In some cases, the archaeologists who discovered these treasures brought them to the museums. However, in many cases thieves looted tombs and warehouses, later selling their goods to museums. Egypt claims this happened, for example, to a historically priceless burial mask purchased by a museum in St. Louis.

Greece and Egypt are not alone in their quests. Many other countries, including China, Iran, India, and Turkey, are seeking the return of objects important to their cultures and histories. Since they now have the desire and capability to preserve their treasures, they argue that it is only right that they have the treasures themselves. It is impossible to ignore the power of these arguments. Whether these relics were taken for noble reasons, such as preserving them, or taken as spoils of war or colonialism, those countries currently in possession must make the moral decision to return these pieces of history to their rightful homes.

Museums Preserve the Cultures of the World

Nations petition museums regularly to return artifacts that once came from their lands. Sometimes museums agree that it is appropriate to return these items, but sometimes they do not agree. While right of ownership might seem always to belong to the country of origin, there are many legitimate reasons that a museum may decline such requests. Perhaps museum funds were used in the past to legally purchase an exhibit with the full cooperation of the native country at that time. A change in political power can motivate a “give me that back” attitude in a donor country. Perhaps the museum that houses ancient treasures is far better equipped to preserve them from destruction and deterioration. Most importantly, an excellent argument can be made that some treasures truly belong to all citizens of the world, not just to those in their country of origin.

Throughout the centuries, many priceless antiquities have been lost or severely damaged. The reasons for this often include the ravages of war, downright carelessness, and the erosion of time. For example, of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, only one, the Pyramids of Giza, survives today. Museums protect items of historical and cultural significance. Museum professionals are experts, trained in the best ways to preserve and restore ancient art and other relics, and they are dedicated to this mission. In the 1940s, one museum curator even risked his life as part of a World War II task force charged with the mission to protect historical monuments and works of art from the war.

It is this need to preserve these irreplaceable objects that most often prevents museums from returning them. For example, Germany still refuses to return the bust of Queen Nefertiti to Egypt because such a long trip could cause irreversible damage to the ancient treasure. In other cases, the stability of the original country calls into question its ability to protect artifacts.

Imagine a world where every country kept to itself all its ancient artifacts. The only way to experience these wonders would be to travel to each country. Most people do not have the money to do this. However, many national museums are free and others are relatively low cost. By housing important artifacts from a variety of cultures, museums around the world allow people everywhere to experience a taste of the history and art that helped to mold the world they live in today.

In order to promote this experience of a world culture, museums should be supported in their desire to retain treasures that they have gathered over time. Their curators and boards of directors can be trusted to make wise decisions about which artifacts to return and which ones to keep. These antiquities are part of a shared history that spans many countries. They should be placed where they will be safe, cared for, and enjoyed by millions.