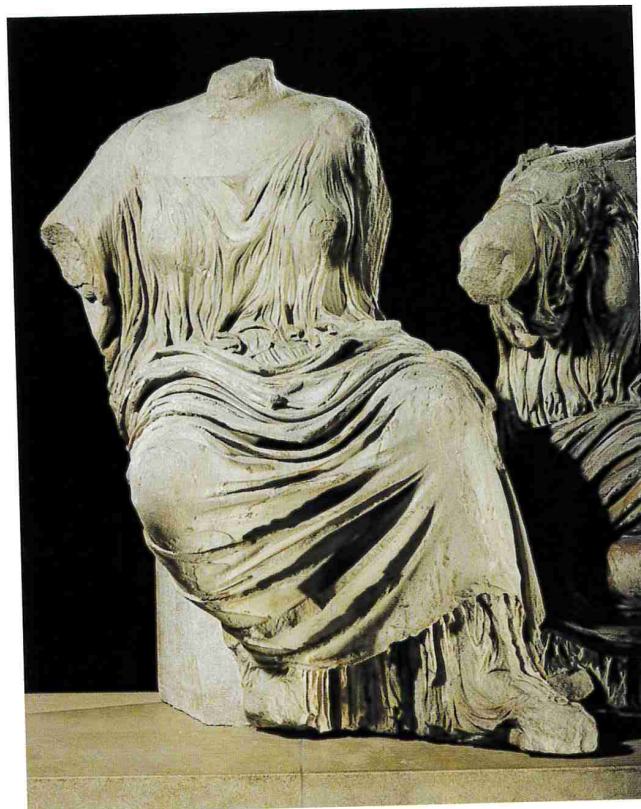


Should we repatriate or not?

In the debates over whether to repatriate cultural objects from museums, *Neil Curtis* argues that there is a better way forward than making simple yes/no decisions



Above: marble statue from the east pediment of the Parthenon

The collections of museums are legacies passed on by previous generations. These are not just material, however, but also include the many relationships that surround them. From Emmanuel Macron calling for French museums to return African cultural heritage, to Jeremy Corbyn supporting the return of the Parthenon sculptures from the British Museum to Greece, the inequality of those relationships is now being challenged, and with it the right of museums to control collections. The issue has also reached popular culture. A scene in the 2018 black superhero film *Black Panther* shows the character Erik 'Killmonger' Stevens in the fictional 'Museum of Great Britain'. Responding to a museum curator who tells him that African artefacts on display are not for sale, he says, 'How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they just take it, like they took everything else?'

There is a danger that Western moral outrage and simplistic arguments will push repatriations on people faster than they would like. It can also drown out the

much subtler – and yet powerful – challenges to museum practice that have been made by indigenous people. For example, museum policies can define human remains as distinct from cultural artefacts, but what if that definition is not the same as that of indigenous people? Likewise, museum policies may expect people making a repatriation claim to prove their lineal ancestry, though this may not be how they have traditionally viewed their lived relationship with a place. Indeed, the very concept of debating property ownership can be alien to people claiming the return of sacred items or ancestral remains.

In 2003 discussions in the University of Aberdeen concluded that what had been curated as a 'ceremonial headdress' had a more significant role as a sacred item of the Kainai, a Canadian First Nation. As well as agreeing to repatriation, the logic of this decision saw it return to traditional use, rather than being an object for study, conservation and display. In recognition of the importance of the repatriation story to the museum, the Kainai agreed

that photographs could be used in exhibitions and teaching within the university, though not published elsewhere. Subsequently, the links between Aberdeen and the Kainai were celebrated by the Kainai keeper of the headdress ordering a kilt jacket to wear when dancing in it, and the gift to the University of a large ammolite fossil found in Canada.

The main value of museum collections for indigenous people can be the opportunity to study them closely, and so help to rejuvenate art and craft skills. Aberdeen University has twice loaned a small, but very rare and important collection of weaving and beadwork collected in southeastern North America in the 1760s to tribal museums in Oklahoma, and is now working with the Chickasaw Cultural Center to create an online resource for use by Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek and Choctaw artists. For now, this resource could be seen as a better arrangement than the repatriation of the collection to a museum which would be accessible to only a few.

Complex, long-term relationships such as these are not always realistic, especially for museums with collections from many parts of the world, but the most significant impact for a museum of collaboration or repatriation can be understanding different ways of thinking. This can include enabling collections to be handled and documented in ways that respect the views of the originating community. It can result in the museum learning more about its collection, but can also mean accepting that trying to record all that is known about an object is both inappropriate and impossible.

Rather than thinking of repatriation requests as simply requiring decisions on whether to return something or not, we therefore need to welcome them as discussions about relationships – among living people, ancestors and 'objects'. Each discussion will be unique, so museums should approach them not with fear and rigid procedures, but with sincerity, open minds and optimism. We deserve to be judged, not by the legacies we inherit, but by the decisions we take and the legacies we create and pass on to others.

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