

DILEMMA: SHOULD COUNTRIES RETURN STOLEN ARTEFACTS?



THE DILEMMA



The British Museum in London contains looted artefacts

When, if ever, should a piece of art taken without permission be returned to its owners?

If a thief walks into the National Gallery in London tomorrow and steals a painting, and the police catch them, the picture would be returned to the gallery. But if art or artefacts (objects of cultural or historical interest) were taken or stolen from a country hundreds of years ago, and are on display in museums or galleries today, should they also be returned?

Two stories in the news recently have put the issue in the spotlight. In the Netherlands, 100,000 pieces of art looted by Dutch colonialists could be returned

to their countries of origin after the country's major museums agreed it was unfair to keep them. But they may be able to loan the objects from their host countries to keep them on display.

In the UK, an ancient sculpture looted from Iraq will be returned after it was seized by the Metropolitan police after it was listed in an online auction site. It is thought it was stolen in the 1990s or early noughties, when the UK and USA were at war with Iraq.

The most famous foreign artefact in the UK is the Elgin Marbles, also known as the Parthenon Marbles. First of all, it's important to point out they aren't actually marbles! They are a collection of ancient Greek sculptures created around 2,500 years ago and are located in the British Museum in London. The fact they are in the UK and not Greece has caused a big argument about who the rightful owners are, and whether art and artefacts should always be kept in their country of origin. The Elgin Marbles are a significant part of the global debate about returning items to their country of origin. They were removed from the Parthenon, an ancient temple in the Greek capital Athens, and from other buildings. They were brought to England at the start of the 19th century by Thomas Bruce, also known as Lord Elgin and the Earl of Elgin. He said he had received permission from the Turkish government to remove artefacts from Greece (the country was



The Banjarmasin Diamond, currently on display at the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands. The museum itself describes this as "war booty" after Dutch troops "violently seized control of Banjarmasin" in Indonesia. The diamond could soon be returned.

under Turkish control at the time), but many experts don't agree. In September of this year, 18 American politicians wrote to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, urging him to open talks with Greece about their return.

Is it high time all countries followed the Netherlands, and returned artefacts like the Elgin Marbles to their country of origin? Or is it a case of "finders keepers"?



Parts of the Elgin Marbles

OPINIONS

"If it doesn't belong to you then you must return it."

– Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You, author of the Dutch report recommending artefacts be returned

"The British Museum acknowledges the difficult histories of some of its collections, including the contested means by which some collections have been acquired such as through military action and... looting."

– Statement by the British Museum in London

DEFINITION

Colonial – Something related to colonies, which are countries that were invaded and occupied by European powers in the past. For example, India was a British colony, and Brazil was a Portuguese colony. Colonialism is the invasion and occupation of the countries. Colonialists are the people who did it and profited from it.

Repatriation – The return of art or cultural items to their country of origin or former owners.



FACTS & FIGURES

A human rights lawyer in the UK has said the British Museum is the "world's largest receiver of **stolen goods**".

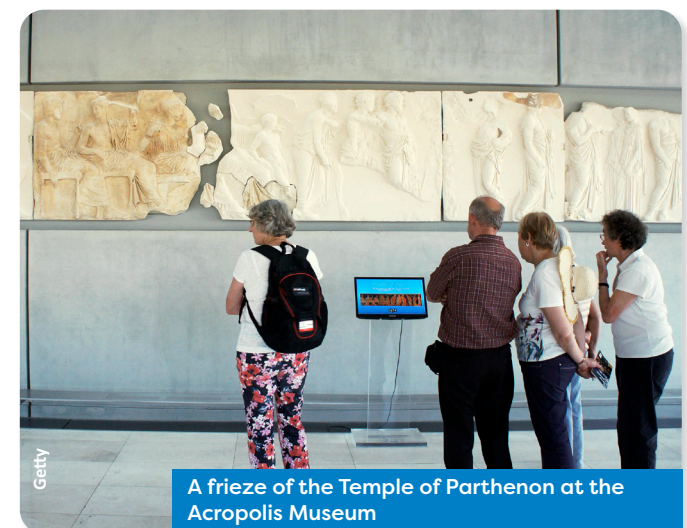
Six out of seven requests for repatriation made to institutions linked to Oxford University have been approved.

In **2019**, Manchester University returned **43** objects to Aboriginal groups in Australia.

90-95% of Africa's cultural history is currently held by museums outside the continent, according to a French government report.

The Elgin Marbles were created by Greek sculptor Phidias in the **5th century BC**.

The Elgin Marbles collection in London consists of roughly half of what now survives of the Parthenon: **75** metres of the original **160** metres of frieze (a narrow, horizontal decoration); **15** of **92** metopes (a rectangular element in a frieze); **17** figures from the pediments (other elements of a building's decoration) and various other pieces of architecture.



The majority of the sculptures are divided between the **Acropolis Museum** in Greece and the British Museum.

But other pieces can be viewed at other major European museums, including the **Musée du Louvre** in France, **Vatican Museums** and the **National Museum** in Denmark.



The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam

THE DUTCH EXAMPLE

The Netherlands is set to be the first European country to take firm action to return artefacts to their countries of origin. A report requested by the government suggested institutions that currently own items taken from other countries should begin the process of repatriation if the 'home country' makes a claim. The report called for a "recognition... of these injustices". However, museums and other venues may be able to keep the items on a loan basis.

But the Netherlands has already begun returning items. At the start of this year, 1,500 historical artefacts, some dating back to 5000 BC, were returned to Indonesia. An Indonesian official said: "This is the first time in Indonesian history that Indonesian cultural objects or artefacts that were taken [to the Netherlands] are returned."

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, has promised to return items to their former colonies in Africa, and last year Germany set out its plans to return artefacts, too. The German guidelines say that museums must publish lists of all their items, so that other countries can make a claim if they want to.



A frieze which forms part of the Marbles

THE ELGIN MARBLES CONTROVERSY

The Elgin Marbles are possibly one of the most famous artefacts in the world. Elgin sold the marbles to the British Government for £35,000, who passed them on to the British Museum in 1816, where they went on permanent public display a year later. In the 1930s, British Museum workers caused permanent damage to the marbles by cleaning them using incorrect products.

The removal of the marbles from the Parthenon even led to a word being invented: "Elginism" means "the taking of cultural treasures, often from one country to another (usually to a wealthier one)".

Some people argue that what Elgin did was an act of "cultural vandalism". That means it's damaging something cultural by removing it from its home. They believe that taking objects in this way damages the cultural identity of the country. They also argue that displaying objects out of their original location and context is wrong.

Since Greece gained independence from Turkish control in 1832, Greek governments have called for the Elgin Marbles to be returned to Athens.

WHAT THE MUSEUM SAYS

Unsurprisingly, the British Museum thinks the sculptures should stay with them! Here's their statement:

"Lord Elgin... acted with the full knowledge and permission of the legal authorities of the day in both Athens and London. Lord Elgin's activities were thoroughly investigated by a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1816 and found to be entirely legal. Here they are seen by a world audience and are actively studied and researched by an international community of scholars, to promote understanding both of ancient Greek culture and its role in the cultures of the world."

The British Museum tells the story of cultural achievement throughout the world, from the dawn of human history more than two million years ago until the present day. Millions of visitors from around the world admire the beauty of the sculptures each year – free of charge. They also gain insights into how ancient Greece influenced and was influenced by the other civilisations it encountered. The sculptures are part of everyone's shared heritage and transcend (go beyond) cultural boundaries."

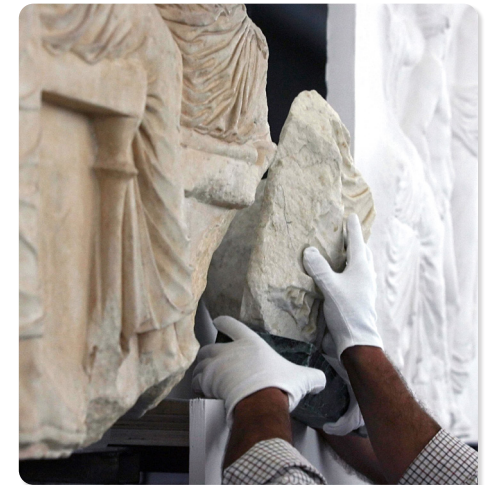


A protest outside the British Museum earlier this year

OTHER HIGH-PROFILE CASES

THE PALERMO FRAGMENT

This was an ancient marble sculpture fragment of the foot and dress of a Greek goddess called Artemis. It was taken from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin and given to British officials on the island of Sicily (which is now part of Italy). It was kept on the island for more than 200 years until 2008, when the Italian president returned it to Greece.



THE KOH-I-NOOR

This is one of the largest cut diamonds in the world. It is part of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom, and is kept with the other jewels in the Tower of London. But it doesn't come from England. It is thought that it was taken from India by the leader of Iran in 1739, and more than 100 years later it ended up back in India with Ranjit Singh, the founder of the Sikh kingdom of the Punjab.



It's from here that the British took the diamond and placed it among the Crown Jewels. It has been used as the main stone in the Queen's crown since 1937.

The British argument is that it was acquired legally in a deal in 1849 between the UK and an Indian leader. But that was when Britain ruled over India, a time when Indians did not have independence. Since British rule ended, both India and their neighbours Pakistan have said the diamond is theirs.

BENIN BRONZES

These are a group of brass and bronze sculptures, including plaques, animal and human figures and ornaments, that date back to the 16th century in the Kingdom of Benin in west Africa (now part of Nigeria). The Kingdom of Benin was occupied by the British from 1897 to 1960. British forces launched an attack on Benin City, which led to multiple casualties. The city's Royal Palace was burned down and many artefacts were looted. This has been described as a war crime by some experts.

Thousands of objects of great importance to the Kingdom were stolen and brought to Britain. Some went to the British Museum, while others were sold to private collectors. Now, there are 900 objects from the Kingdom of Benin in the British Museum's collection. The Museum's director visited Nigeria in 2018, where the current ruler of the Kingdom, Oba Ewuare, repeated a request for the collection to be returned.



SHOULD ALL ART STAY IN ITS COUNTRY OF ORIGIN?

If you go to a major art gallery anywhere in the world, the chances are you'll see priceless works of art by international artists. That's because art is frequently bought and sold by individuals and museums from all over the world, and has been for years. You can see works by one of Spain's greatest ever painters, Pablo Picasso, in dozens of museums and galleries across the planet. Sometimes, a rich individual who buys a painting at auction will then loan it to a museum so it can be seen by the general public.

Some people get upset when a classic work of art is sold and leaves its country of origin. They argue that some important, famous paintings should always belong to the country where the artist was from. Others say that artwork should be bought and sold like anything else, and that it belongs to the entire world, not just the piece of land where the artist was born.

Lord Elgin always argued that he was given a document that provided him with full permission from the Ottoman authorities to remove the sculptures. But some people have questioned whether Elgin's translated copy of the document, which was presented to politicians as proof of permission, is real. There are theories that it was a fake or that the translation was wrong. The original document has never been found.

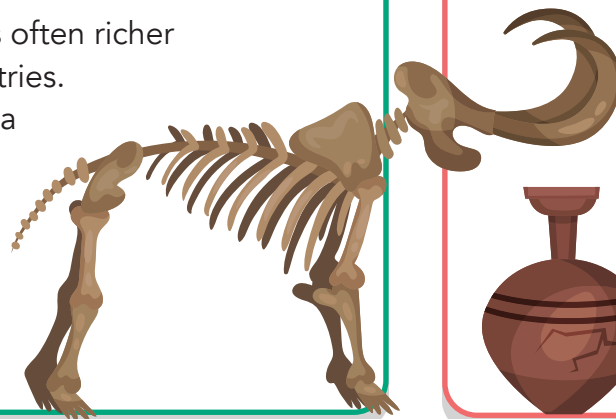
YES, COUNTRIES SHOULD RETURN ARTEFACTS



1. THEY DON'T BELONG HERE – These ancient objects and works of art came from other countries at a time when European powers were forcing themselves, often violently, on to other cultures. In the case of the Elgin Marbles, Greece has been asking for the Marbles to be returned ever since they gained independence. European countries should do the right thing.

2. MANY MAY NOT HAVE BEEN TAKEN WITH PERMISSION – Some European museums argue that some of their artefacts were taken legally. The British Museum says exactly that about the Elgin Marbles – but some experts disagree. We may never know for sure, but if there is uncertainty about whether someone had permission to take artefacts, then they should definitely be returned.

3. IT SETS A POSITIVE EXAMPLE – It's often richer countries that take art from poorer countries. Artefacts form a really important part of a country's history. Returning them could set a good example and lead to lots of other "treasures" being returned to their home countries.



NO, COUNTRIES SHOULD NOT RETURN ARTEFACTS

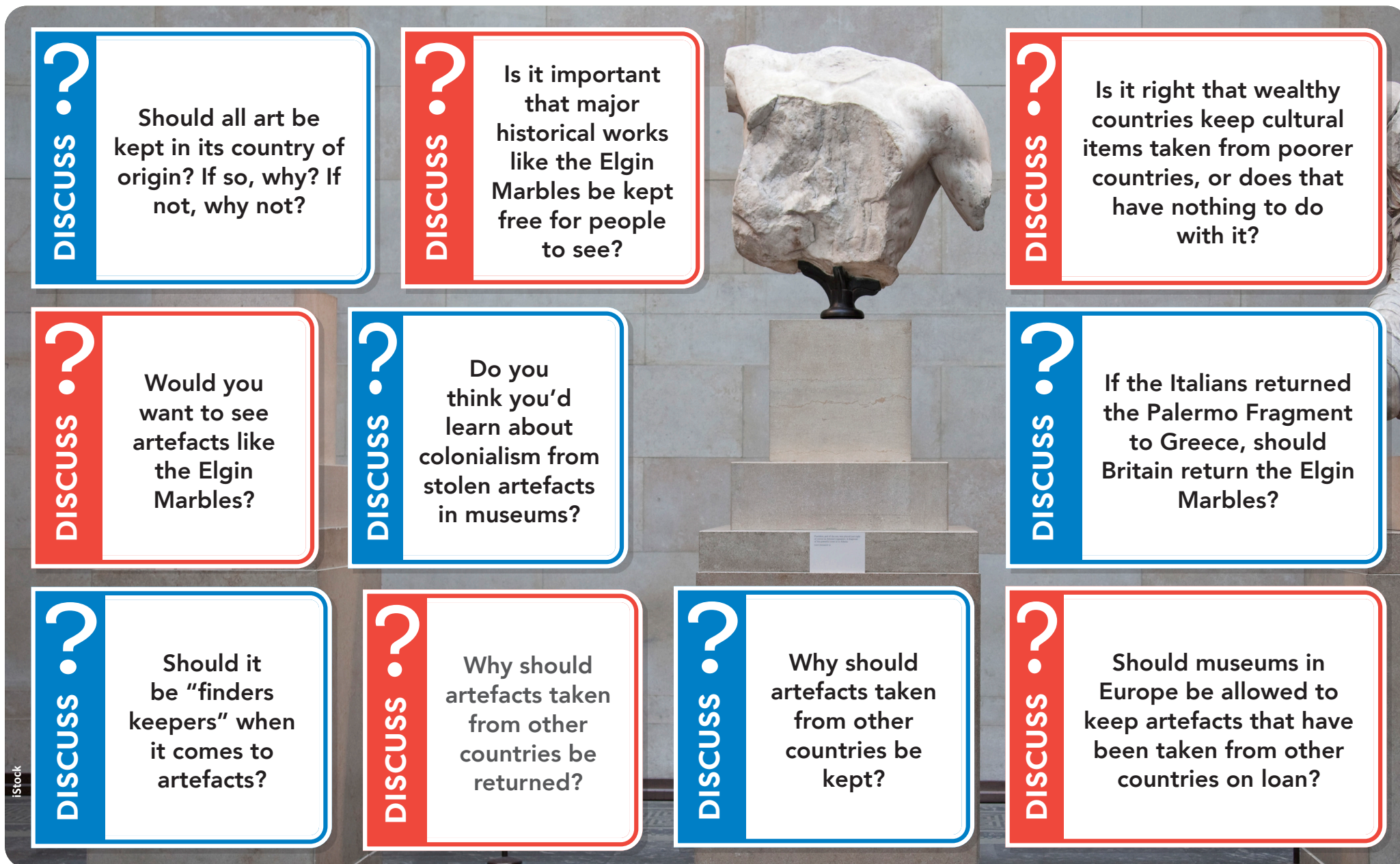


1. THEY MAY BE SAFER WHERE THEY ARE – Most of the artefacts are currently looked after with a great deal of care by experts. Some items come from parts of Africa and the Middle East that are currently in conflict or civil unrest, such as Syria or Nigeria. They may be safer in the museums and institutions they are currently kept in.

2. CULTURE BELONGS TO EVERYONE – Works of art spread all over the world, and can be enjoyed by millions of people. The culture of the planet is shared by everybody, and doesn't have to be kept in countries of origin. It would be a very boring world if art had to remain in the home country of the artist.

3. THEY CAN TEACH PEOPLE IN EUROPE ABOUT COLONIALISM – The current ruler of the Kingdom of Benin says that the objects in the British Museum serve as "cultural ambassadors" for Benin culture. Artefacts can be an important way of teaching people about their country's colonial history.





DISCUSS • ?

Should all art be kept in its country of origin? If so, why? If not, why not?

DISCUSS • ?

Is it important that major historical works like the Elgin Marbles be kept free for people to see?

DISCUSS • ?

Is it right that wealthy countries keep cultural items taken from poorer countries, or does that have nothing to do with it?

DISCUSS • ?

Would you want to see artefacts like the Elgin Marbles?

DISCUSS • ?

Do you think you'd learn about colonialism from stolen artefacts in museums?

DISCUSS • ?

If the Italians returned the Palermo Fragment to Greece, should Britain return the Elgin Marbles?

DISCUSS • ?

Should it be "finders keepers" when it comes to artefacts?

DISCUSS • ?

Why should artefacts taken from other countries be returned?

DISCUSS • ?

Why should artefacts taken from other countries be kept?

DISCUSS • ?

Should museums in Europe be allowed to keep artefacts that have been taken from other countries on loan?