


Research Article

The Colonial History Of Stolen Cultural Artefacts: The British Museum And Its Creditor-Contributors

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The Colonial History of Stolen Cultural Artefacts: The British Museum and Its Creditor-Contributors

Abstract. Through the deliberate removal and appropriation of cultural artefacts from its colonized areas, the uncomfortable legacy of British colonialism has a dark chapter of a significant cultural upheaval, in addition to its economic exploitation and political domination. This study, which is framed within the notion of extractive colonialism, shows how the British Empire made the British Museum more of an imperial archive, rather than its own professed designation as a national public museum, that too in the disguise of facilitating preservation and academic research. Iconic attractions including the Rosetta Stone, the Elgin Marbles, the Benin Bronzes, the Amaravati Marbles, and the Winged Lions of Nimrud, form a tiny minority among the contested items in the collection of the museum. This study, through regional case studies from Egypt, Greece, India, Nigeria, and Central Asia, discusses how each instance serves as an example of the great colonial reasoning that valued British museological aspirations over indigenous heritage. It also examines the growing international

calls for restitution and the monolithic opposition of the Museum that is backed by British legal instruments including the British Museum Act 1963. In addition to identifying the coercive, exploitative, or opaque patterns of acquisition, the paper also reflects on the role of global cooperation frameworks like the 1970 UNESCO Convention in addressing colonial-era state-sponsored cultural theft. Considering how these artefacts act as symbols of national pride, collective memory, and postcolonial resistance, the paper approaches distribution in a larger historical and legal context, rather than dealing with it as a purely moral demand. It argues that as long as the British Museum remain neglectful of the calls for restitution of stolen cultural artefacts, its professed objective of being a custodian of world heritage will remain debated unabated.

Keywords: Extractive Colonialism, Artefact Restitution, Colonial Cultural Theft, Museological Ethics, British Museum, Postcolonial Heritage.

Abstrak. Melalui penghapusan yang disengaja serta perampasan artefak budaya dari wilayah-wilayah yang dikolonisasi, warisan kolonialisme Inggris yang tidak nyaman menyisakan babak kelam berupa guncangan budaya yang signifikan, di samping eksploitasi ekonomi dan dominasi politiknya. Kajian ini, yang dibingkai dalam gagasan kolonialisme ekstraktif, menunjukkan bagaimana Kekaisaran Inggris menjadikan British Museum lebih sebagai arsip imperial ketimbang sesuai dengan penetapan resminya sebagai museum publik nasional, itu pun dengan kedok untuk memfasilitasi pelestarian dan penelitian akademis. Daya tarik ikonik seperti Batu Rosetta, Marmer Elgin, Perunggu Benin, Marmer Amaravati, dan Singa Bersayap Nimrud, hanyalah sebagian kecil dari sekian banyak benda koleksi museum yang kini diperdebatkan. Melalui studi kasus regional dari Mesir, Yunani, India, Nigeria, dan Asia Tengah, penelitian ini membahas bagaimana setiap kasus menjadi contoh dari logika kolonial yang mengutamakan ambisi museologis Inggris di atas warisan budaya masyarakat pribumi. Kajian ini juga menyoroti meningkatnya seruan internasional untuk pengembalian artefak (restitusi) serta oposisi monolitik dari pihak Museum yang didukung oleh instrumen hukum Inggris, termasuk British Museum Act 1963. Selain mengidentifikasi pola perolehan yang koersif, eksploitatif, atau tidak transparan, tulisan ini juga merefleksikan peran kerangka kerja kerjasama global seperti Konvensi UNESCO 1970 dalam menangani pencurian budaya yang dilakukan negara pada era kolonial. Mengingat artefak-artefak tersebut berfungsi sebagai simbol kebanggaan nasional, memori kolektif, dan perlawanan pascakolonial, tulisan ini menempatkan persoalan restitusi dalam konteks historis dan hukum yang lebih luas, alih-alih semata-mata sebagai tuntutan moral. Tulisan ini berargumen bahwa selama British Museum terus mengabaikan seruan pengembalian artefak budaya yang dicuri, tujuan resminya sebagai penjaga warisan dunia akan tetap diperdebatkan tanpa henti.

Kata Kunci: Kolonialisme Ekstraktif, Restitusi Artefak, Pencurian Budaya Kolonial, Etika Museologi, British Museum, Warisan Pascakolonial.

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism was made inevitable not only for the 17th and 19th century empires 'where the sun never sets', but also for each and every political entity that believed in hard power, not to maintain the very existence of the colonial powerhouses, but to quench the predominantly Western thirst for expansionism. The Industrial Revolution that triggered the rapid onset of colonial expansionism and advances made London the largest commercial hub the world had ever been witness

to¹. The British colonialism was marked as a prolonged period of darkness and violence in the majority, if not all, of the history of their colonies. The sole purpose of British imperialist strategies being nothing but the strengthening of the heart of the Empire at the cost of anything else, the British forces looted not only monetary articles, but also cultures, heritage, and epistemologies².

Having created the largest empire on land in the history of mankind in terms of area that spanned nearly a quarter of the total known world and passed legislations on over a quarter of the world population, the British Empire abounded in its access to the largest collection of all kinds of material and cultural resources worldwide, which took for granted, whereby it - hiding behind the name of preserving global heritage in a safe British soil - ravaged upon cultures, looted artefacts of historical and cultural significance, and deported them to London in order to enrich and beautify the city³. It can be noted that these heinous acts were, in part, an integral component of the British version of exploitative and extractive colonialism.

Most of the stolen or 'rightfully acquired' artifacts are now parts of a number of Western and British museums, the most infamous of them being the British Museum of London. Among the museum's permanent collection of 8 million works, a large number owes their origins to lands the British had long been used to identify as 'others', whom they were chosen to 'civilize'⁴. A short glimpse to the highlights of the Museum would make the fact more than clear that the Museum owes to these 'others' more than it does to the Britain itself⁵.

Exploitative Versus Facilitative Colonialism

Colonialism can be defined as a practice of domination which involves the subjugation of one nation to another⁶. It can also be described as the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers and exploiting it economically, whereas imperialism refers to a policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonisation, use of military force, or other means⁷.

¹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). London – Finance. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/London/Finance>.

² Gopal, N. R. (2021). The implications of British colonial domination on the Indian cultural ethos. **The Creative Launcher**, 6(5). Perception Publishing. See also Bhandari, S., & Bhatnagar, N. (2023). Cultural repressiveness in British Raj as depicted in **Sea of Poppies** and **Things Fall Apart**. **Journal of Chemical Health Risks**, 13(6), 879–883.

³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). British Empire. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Empire>. See also Mantena, K. (2010). *Colonialism as civilizing mission: Cultural ideology in British India* (1st ed.). Anthem Press. ISBN: 9781843310921.

⁴ MacGregor, N. (2010). *A history of the world in 100 objects*. Penguin Books. See also Mantena, K. (2010). *Colonialism as civilizing mission: Cultural ideology in British India* (1st ed.). Anthem Press. ISBN: 9781843310921.

⁵ YouTube. (n.d.). *The violence of colonialism* [Video]. Redfish. <https://youtu.be/hoTxIRWrvp8?si=jVpz9OYbXFS-MMGi>.

⁶ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). Colonialism. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>.

⁷ Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. (n.d.). Colonialism. https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/colonialism.

Whatever the definitions be, both imperialism and colonialism was perfectly tailored to match with European and Western capitalist motives of economic domination and cultural appropriation. While extractive or exploitative colonialism focused primarily on the systematic drainage of wealth and resources from colonised territories to benefit the imperialist power, facilitative colonialism got works done through the creation of dependent relationships and strategic positioning for broader political objectives.

The necessity for drawing a definite distinction between imperialism and colonialism arises from the fact that both the terms are often used interchangeably. However, tracing the origin of the words to their roots provide some reasonable clues on how they differ from each other. The term colony is derived from the Latin word 'Colonus' - meaning farmer - which remains that the practice of colonialism most often involved transfer of population to a new territory, where those arrived keeping political allegiance to the metropolitan. Imperialism, at a small level of contrast, comes from the Latin word 'imperium' - meaning to order or command - which provides attention to the way that one country exerts power on another, irrespective of its being whether through settlement, sovereignty, or indirect mechanisms of control⁸.

Extractive or exploitative colonialism, also called the planter colonialism, is a form of imperial dominion that "employs fewer colonists and focuses on extracting natural resources or labour for the benefit of the metropole"⁹. It includes the systematic and legally backed removal of wealth, raw materials, and human resource of the colonized 'others', which constitutes the unidirectional flow of resources, i.e., from the colonies to the colonizer. This model of colonialism with all its so-called values, was epitomised in the British rule in regions like India, Egypt, and Nigeria, whereby the colonialist British forces, during their rule between 1765 and 1938, extracted sums that could make up an amount equivalent to \$44.6 trillion from India itself¹⁰. To put into perspective, \$45 trillion is 17 times more than the total GDP of the United Kingdom as of 2017, which "would be enough to carpet the surface area of London in British pound 50 notes almost 4 times over"¹¹.

Facilitative colonialism represents a more indirect form of imperial control that puts emphasis on establishing conditions serving long-term strategic interests through military positioning, economic dependency, or political influence. This model of colonialism usually involves significant investments in the development of infrastructure and institutions in the colonized territories, even

⁸ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). Colonialism. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>.

⁹ Vedantu. (n.d.). Colonialism – Meaning, types and impact. <https://www.vedantu.com/history/colonialism>.

¹⁰ Al Jazeera. (2018, December 19). How Britain stole \$45 trillion from India. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/12/19/how-britain-stole-45-trillion-from-india>. See also Chatterjee, R., & Bhattacharya, N. (n.d.). *Agrarian and other histories*. Columbia University Press. <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/agrarian-and-other-histories/9789382381952>.

¹¹ The Economic Times. (n.d.). How the British pulled off a \$45 trillion heist in India. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/independence-day-how-the-british-pulled-off-a-45-trillion-heist-in-india/articleshow/102746097.cms?from=mdr>.

though the ultimate purpose of this expenditures is to advance the strategic objectives of the colonizer. The facilitative approach, which often operates under frameworks of trusteeship arrangements and protectorate status, can be viewed epitomized in the US advances in places such as the Hawaii and Marshall Islands. The establishment of US military bases and testing facilities in Marshall Islands served broader Cold War objectives more than it served immediate economic gains. The 1983 Compact Agreement between the Marshall Islands and the States formulized their dependency relationship by letting "Marshallese people to migrate freely to the United States"¹².

Cultural Theft and Loss of History

When asked to define what culture is, many à polymaths and intellectuals stumbled to give an appropriate answer, let alone the case of commoners. In matter-of-fact, culture is what that makes you, you, what makes me, me, and what that makes us, us. Culture is not simply the history of a community; it extends to "the artwork, the historic artefacts, and the stories and myths that shed light on the livelihoods and values of those who lived in the distant past and give context to our own dally lives"¹³.

We, as members of humankind, do share some kind of common heritage, of which cultural property is definitely a part. Trafficking in cultural property often leads to highly devastative results in the loss, destruction, removal, or theft of invaluable and irreplaceable items. "While criminals make significant profits from this illicit trafficking, humankind is denied access to archaeological information and to artefacts of its shared heritage"¹⁴. Despite the attempts made by concerned authorities to track and safeguard valuable artefacts, the theft, looting, and plunder of cultural heritage have evolved into a global activity and market. The looting of cultural heritage hinders material fulfilment of a nation and is, at the same time, catastrophic to the human civilization as a whole. By eliminating or destroying heritage, legacy, and culturally cherished treasures, cultural theft causes extreme harm to the aesthetic, historical, and spiritual characteristics, the effects of which do not limit themselves to the present generation, but also extend to the future's progeny¹⁵.

It has to be acknowledged that the colonial powers brought with them not only destruction, but also certain, yet limited, elements of the Industrial Revolution. According to S. Vijay Kumar, the co-founder of India Pride Project, some of the artefacts stolen by the British were taken away under the concept of parthage. He tells that, "In return for using their expertise in archaeology, the colonial powers gave themselves the right to choose the best of the finds as payment." Historian and

¹² Columbia Human Rights Law Review. (n.d.). Trust issues: Militarization, destruction, and the search for a remedy in the Marshall Islands. <https://hrlr.law.columbia.edu/hrlr-online/trust-issues-militarization-destruction-and-the-search-for-a-remedy-in-the-marshall-islands/>.

¹³ Clarke, C. M., & Szydlo, E. J. (n.d.). *Stealing history: Art theft, looting, and other crimes against our cultural heritage*.

¹⁴ UNODC. (n.d.). Trafficking in cultural property. *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/emerging-crimes/trafficking-in-cultural-property.html>.

¹⁵ Al-Ansi, A., Lee, J.-S., King, B., & Han, H. (2021). Stolen history: Community concern towards looting of cultural heritage and its tourism implications. *Tourism Management*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261517721000686>.

author William Dalrymple reportedly described the plunder carried out by the East India Company and the British government as one of the "supreme act(s) of corporate violence in world history"¹⁶.

Part of the service sector, tourism, in general, and cultural tourism, in particular, draw heavily from cultural and heritage products. National identity, for a great share of world population, is deeply intertwined with community attachments to culture, food, history, customs, rituals, and traditions¹⁷. A study from 2015 has provided empirical support to the notion that authentic heritage/cultural tourism play an appreciable role in creating memorable travel experiences¹⁸. Whenever these cultural assets are diminished and/or removed off its natural setting, it not only results in the loss of history, but also hinders the material prosperity and economic progress of those dispossessed nations.

The British Museum: An Overview

Being the very first national public museum to cover all fields of knowledge, The British Museum boasts the largest permanent collection in a museum with its collection of 8 million works¹⁹. The Museum, established by Act of Parliament in 1753, was primarily based on three collections, namely the antiquities and natural history specimens bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane, the Cottonian library and antiquities of the Cotton family of Westminster that they accumulated over 50 years, and the Harleian collection of manuscripts collected by of the first two Earls of Oxford²⁰. As per the report of ALVA, the British museum was the most popular tourist destination in the UK²¹.

What distinguished the Museum from its likes was that it belonged to a new kind of museum that was national, owned neither by the king nor the church, freely open to the public, and, strikingly, aiming to collect everything literally. The Montagu house that hosted the museum from its inception turned out to be increasingly crowded and decrepit by around the dawn of 19th century itself, prompting the trustees of the museum to renovate the dilapidated building under the

¹⁶ India Today. (2024, July 7). Repatriation and India Pride Project: Looted gods and colonial heritage. <https://www.indiatoday.in/sunday-special/story/repatriation-india-pride-project-looted-smuggled-gods-statues-colonial-rule-heritage-vijay-kumar-british-museums-2563311-2024-07-07>.

¹⁷ Al-Ansi, A., Lee, J.-S., King, B., & Han, H. (2021). *Stolen history: Community concern towards looting of cultural heritage and its tourism implications*. *Tourism Management*, ScienceDirect. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261517721000686>.

¹⁸ Bryce, D., Curran, R., O'Gorman, K., & Taheri, B. (2015). Visitors' engagement and authenticity: Japanese heritage consumption. *Tourism Management*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261517714001642>.

¹⁹ Smith, Richard. "Ranking the World's Most Admired Art Museums." *Forbes*, 30 Oct. 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rsmdiscovery/2017/10/30/ranking-the-worlds-most-admired-art-museums-and-what-big-business-can-learn-from-them/?sh=1f0cee263b33>.

²⁰ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). British Museum. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/British-Museum>. See also Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Museums in London. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/London/Museums>.

²¹ BBC News. (2024). British Museum most visited UK attraction in 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c39v2ddn4p40>.

famous Neo-Classical architect, Sir Robert Smirke, who proposed plans for the extraordinary quadrangular building in the then highly fashionable Greek Revival style of architecture²².

The British Museum is the largest and most highlighted museum in Britain preserving and documenting classical antiquities²³. However, the ways by which the British had their hands on most of these ancient artefacts are inflammably contentious. As a custodian of cultural objects, the Museum's professed objectives appear to be entirely altruistic and unselfish, where by the concerned authorities state that:

“The British Museum is unique in bringing together under one roof the cultures of the world, spanning continents and oceans. No other museum is responsible for collections of the same depth and breadth, beauty and significance.

Its eight million objects allow us to explore the extraordinary diversity of human cultures, from small communities to vast empires, to discover the many forms and expressions human beings have given to every aspect of life, and to realise how closely they are interconnected²⁴.”

The most highlighted “Don't miss” labelled works in the British museum includes the Parthenon marbles (Greece), the Nereid monument (Türkiye), the coffin of Hornedjitef and the Rosetta stone (Egypt), the Winged Lions of Nimrud (Iraq), the Olduvai stone chopping tool (Tanzania), the Hoa Hakanani'a (Rapa Nui, i.e., Easter Island) the bronze bust portrait of the Emperor Augustus (Egypt), the Lewis Chessmen (Scotland), the Aztec Serpent mosaic (Mexico), the Ife head and the Benin bronzes (Nigeria), the Oxus treasure (Tajikistan), the bust of Ramesses the Great (Egypt), the Amaravati marbles (India), the sculptures from the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and the Temple of Artemis (Greece), the vast collection of porcelain ceramics (China), and the Sutton Hoo helmet (England)²⁵. The original nucleus of the Museum “was rapidly expanded by purchases and gifts and as well as by the plunder of war and colonial conquest.”²⁶

²² The British Museum. (n.d.). The British Museum story. Retrieved June 17, 2025, from <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story>. See also Wilson, D. M. (n.d.). *The British Museum: A history*. British Museum Press.

²³ Duthie, E. (2011). The British Museum: An imperial museum in a post-imperial world. *Public History Review*, 18.

²⁴ The British Museum. (n.d.). About us. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us>.

²⁵ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>. See also The British Museum. (n.d.). 12 things not to miss at the British Museum. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/12-things-not-miss-british-museum>. See also Through Eternity Tours. (n.d.). Highlights of the British Museum. <https://www.througheternity.com/en/blog/history/Highlights-of-the-British-Museum.html>. See also Duthie, E. (2011). The British Museum: An imperial museum in a post-imperial world. *Public History Review*, 18.

²⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Museums in London. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/London/Museums>.

Egypt: The Rosetta Stone

James Cuno argues that Egypt had minor or no interest in ancient heritage that their pyramids, mummies, sarcophagi, and paintings reminded of, and that it was only after Europeans having found the Rosetta stone and deciphered the hieroglyphics that Egypt itself started to rediscover its 'being-forgotten' history²⁷. Egypt, being one of the first regions in the world to support civilizations and empires at a large level, abounds in cultural and heritage assets that fail not to remind the world of its past glory as well as to impress and quench the thirst of modern aesthetics and architectural ideals.

One of the grand arenas of violent competition between British and French Imperial powers since Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion in 1798, Egypt was one of the first nations from the Middle East to taste the British tradition of preserving global heritage in British soil. Concomitant with this imperialist tradition was the large-scale translocation of Egyptian antiquities to the British Museum among others. Therefore, not to much surprise, the Egyptian collections in the Museum account to around 120,000 artefacts, falling third to Iraq and Italy in the first two ranks respectively²⁸. The most highlighted items of this vast collection include the Rosetta stone topping the charts, the sarcophagus of Hornedjitef, and the head of the statue of Emperor Augustus, among others.

The Rosetta stone, carrying inscriptions in three different writing systems - Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Demotic, and the ancient Greek - is a stela with a royal decree issued in 196 BC on behalf of King Ptolemy V Epiphanes of the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt²⁹. The stone was discovered by some Frenchmen in 1799 from Fort Julian at Rosetta (of which the modern name is Rashid) and was relocated to then Napoleonic scientific association in Cairo, the Institut d'Égypte, at the earliest³⁰. Following the Rattle of Aboukir Bay in 1801 between the British and French troops where the French was defeated, the Rosetta Stone, along with many other antiquities, was seized by the British following the Capitulation of Alexandria and several discussions and so-called agreements³¹. It has since been a great attraction to the visitors of the British Museum. The unique value of the stone lies in the fact that it was the Rosetta stone that opened up the entire world of Ancient Egypt and its priestly hieroglyphics which "had for centuries baffled Europeans."³²

The sarcophagus of Hornedjitef, a masterpiece example of Egyptian art, preserved currently in the cells of the British Museum, was excavated from Asasif,

²⁷ Cuno, J. (2008). *Who owns antiquity? Museums and the battle over our ancient heritage* (Rev. ed.). Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7tcbg>.

²⁸ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>.

²⁹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Rosetta Stone. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rosetta-Stone>.

³⁰ Parkinson, R. B., Diffie, W., & Simpson, R. S. (1999). *Cracking codes: The Rosetta Stone and decipherment*. University of California Press.

³¹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Rosetta Stone. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rosetta-Stone>.

³² MacGregor, N. (2010). *A history of the world in 100 objects*. Penguin Books.

Thebes, Egypt, in 1820s when the hieroglyphic script had just been deciphered, for which it received immense attraction and archaeological value³³. Meanwhile, The Meroë Head is a bronze head, larger-than-life in size, depicting Augustus, the first Roman emperor, and was discovered in what was once part of Roman Egypt. It is held in high admiration thanks to its striking appearance and Augustus' commanding gaze. The head was unearthed by a British archaeologist named John Garstang in 1910 and was donated by an eager Garstang to the British Museum in 1911³⁴.

India: The Amaravati Marbles

In 3000 years of India's history, people from all over the world have come and invaded its territory, captured its lands, and conquered its people's minds. "From Alexander onwards the Greeks, the Turks, the Moguls, the Portuguese, The British, the French, the Dutch, all of them came fish and looted us, took over what was ours³⁵." The British version of extractive colonialism, along with its infamous 'Divide and Rule' policy, has undoubtedly played the most important role - if not it is the sole reason - in making India, which was for most of the 1st to 17th centuries, the richest geographical region in the world with its contribution of about 35-40 percentage to the global economy, one of the poorest of world nations by the time it became independent in 1947, with 55% of its population living below the international poverty line, and having an average life expectancy of 27 years and a literacy rate of 16.7% (as of 1951), and with its GDP accounting to only 4% of global GDP³⁶.

The British Raj not only looted India of its material monetary articles and exploited its whole economy, but also stripped the nation off its cultures, traditions, and values³⁷. From the innumerable artefacts the British had placed their hands on, the British Museum itself possess a vast collection of Indian artefacts that reach up to above 52,000³⁸. The most highlighted among those include the Amaravati marbles, a bronze Shiva Nataraja, and a sandstone Harihara statue.

³³BBC. (n.d.). *Mummy of Hornedjitef – A history of the world in 100 objects*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00pwmgq>.

³⁴ Through Eternity Tours. (n.d.). Highlights of the British Museum. <https://www.througheternity.com/en/blog/history/Highlights-of-the-British-Museum.html>.

³⁵ Speakola. (2011). Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam – Vision for India. <https://speakola.com/political/dr-a-p-j-abdul-kalam-vision-for-india-2011>.

³⁶ Consulate General of India, Jeddah. (n.d.). *History of Indian economy*. https://cgijeddah.gov.in/web_files/267622636-History-of-Indian-Economy.pdf. See also Markovits, C. (2017). The Indian economy and the British Empire in the Company period: Some additional reflections around an essay by David Washbrook. *Modern Asian Studies*, 51(2), 375–398. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000014>. See also A Glass Half Full or Half Empty? (2024, August 17). The New Indian Express. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2024/Aug/17/a-glass-half-full-or-half-empty>.

³⁷ The Guardian. (2021, June 29). British Empire in India – Amartya Sen. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/29/british-empire-india-amartya-sen>.

³⁸ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>.

The Great Shrine of Amaravati was one of the oldest, largest, and most important monuments of Buddhism in Ancient India³⁹. Also called the Elliot marbles, the Amaravati marbles constitute of a collection of 120 sculptures - made of a limestone called the Palnad marbles - and inscriptions that were recovered from the Amaravati Mahachaitya in Andhra Pradesh, and now stored at the British Museum. Over the years since its first formal record by a westerner in 1797 to 1859 when these marbles were moved to London, excavations on the site were carried out with the help of Major Colin Mackenzie, Sir Walter Elliot, Dr. Edward Balfour, and others. Originally planned by London to house them at the India museum under the label of the East India Company, the dissolution of the Company delayed their erection at the British Museum until it was done so in 1880⁴⁰. It's a matter of fact that the British preserved the Amaravati Marbles from decay and destruction, but 'ends do not always justify the means.'

Greece: The Parthenon Sculptures

The Greek collection at the British Museum houses over 64,000 artefacts that were taken out of the region⁴¹. The Parthenon sculptures, a collection of Ancient Greek sculptures from the Parthenon and other sites of the Athenian Acropolis, were removed from Ottoman Greece and shipped to Britain under the supervision of Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, and are sometimes referred to in the UK as the Elgin marbles⁴². Sculpted by the renowned ancient sculptor Phidias and his assistants between 443 and 437 BC, this collection of Greek -sculptures is possibly "the most important grouping of classical sculpture in existence." The sculptures, for decades, have caused several controversies, triggering Greek and British politicians to clashes over their rightful home⁴³.

Thomas Bruce was the British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte of the Ottoman Empire from 1799 to 1803, and the 7th Earl of Elgin from 1801 to 1812. Out of the 524 feet frieze around the Parthenon's main inner chamber, Elgin removed approximately 247 feet of the frieze. He also acquired 15 of the ninety-two metopes, predominately from the south side Lapith and Centaur series⁴⁴. Bruce, originally, had

³⁹ Amaravati Gallery. (n.d.). *The British Museum*. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/india-amaravati>.

⁴⁰ Kevin Standage Photography. (2019, October 3). Amaravati marbles – British Museum (Elliot Marbles). <https://kevinstandagephotography.wordpress.com/2019/10/03/amaravati-marbles-british-museum-elliott-marbles/>.

⁴¹ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>.

⁴² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Elgin Marbles. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <http://britannica.com/topic/Elgin-Marbles>.

⁴³ BBC News. (2014, December 5). Elgin Marbles: What are the Parthenon sculptures and will Greece get them back? <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-30342462>.

⁴⁴ Merryman, J. H. (Ed.). (2009). *Thinking a*⁴⁴ Amaravati Gallery. (n.d.). *The British Museum*. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/india-amaravati>.

⁴⁴ Kevin Standage Photography. (2019, October 3). Amaravati marbles – British Museum (Elliot Marbles). <https://kevinstandagephotography.wordpress.com/2019/10/03/amaravati-marbles-british-museum-elliott-marbles/>.

intended only to ship to Britain drawings and moulds of Classical Greek antiquities, but he overrode his intention as a result of opportunism, for which the practice of stripping artefacts off their natural setting is, at times, referred to as Elginism⁴⁵.

As his request to the British government officials to back him in employing artists to take casts and drawings of the Parthenon's sculptured portions was turned down, it had costed Elgin a personal cost of 74,240 pounds in the excavation and removal of sculptures from Parthenon to Britain⁴⁶. What is more disgusting is that, even though his intention was to use the marbles for a private museum, Elgin sold them to the British government for 35000 pounds, that too declining higher offers from other potential buyers including Napoleon⁴⁷.

Nigeria: The Benin Bronzes

The Benin-Niger-Soudan expedition was, in matter of fact, "a lasting image of the reduction of the liberty and equality of colonial subjects, in which for the imperial idea to succeed, the European powers depended on exercising their military power on African peoples.⁴⁸" The Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897 resulted not only in the sack of Benin city and the fall and eventual absorption of the Kingdom of Benin into British colonial Nigeria, but also razed numerous civilizational components and cultures. Most of the city's plunder was kept with the expedition, which included around 2,500 religious artefacts, Benin's visual history, mnemonics, and artworks, which were shipped to Britain, among which are the Benin Bronzes, a collection of over 1000 metal plaques and sculptures, commemorative heads, animal and human figures, items of royal regalia, and personal ornaments⁴⁹.

The Benin Bronzes provide insights not only to the Kingdom's dynastic history, but also to its social history and its bilateral and multilateral relationships with neighbour kingdoms, states, and societies, which all add to its artistic, ethnographic, and historical value. Following the fall of the Kingdom of Benin, the

⁴⁴ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>.

⁴⁴ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Elgin Marbles. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <http://britannica.com/topic/Elgin-Marbles>.

⁴⁴ BBC News. (2014, December 5). Elgin Marbles: What are the Parthenon sculptures and will Greece get them back? <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-30342462>.

bout the Elgin Marbles: Critical essays on cultural property, art and law (2nd ed.). Kluwer Law International.

⁴⁵ Duthie, E. (2011). The British Museum: An imperial museum in a post-imperial world. *Public History Review*, 18.

⁴⁶ Casey, C. (2008, October 30). "Grecian grandeurs and the rude wasting of old time": Britain, the Elgin Marbles, and post-revolutionary Hellenism. *Foundations*, 3(1).

⁴⁷ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Elgin Marbles. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <http://britannica.com/topic/Elgin-Marbles>. See also The Guardian. (2004, July 21). Elgin Marbles: Fact or fiction? <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/jul/21/highereducation.parthenon>.

⁴⁸ Hicks, D. (2020). *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution*. Pluto Press.

⁴⁹ Roots 101. (n.d.). From West Africa to the world: The significance of the Benin Bronzes. <https://www.roots-101.org/news/the-benin-bronzes-rediscovering-the-rich-cultural-heritage-of-the-kingdom-of-benin>.

British looted many of its monuments and palaces, some of the plunder of which were submitted to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, and others were auctioned off or sold privately, or ended up museums around the globe⁵⁰.

The Ife Head is one of the 18 copper alloy sculptures unearthed in 1938 at Ife, Nigeria, which was the religious and royal centre of the Yoruba people. When this stunning object was displayed in the British Museum for the first time, it caused something no less than a controversy, with "many viewers refusing to accept that 14th century West African artists were capable of such realism⁵¹." The realism and sophisticated craftsmanship that reflected on the Ife Head challenge the long-held dismissive western and global conception of African art. Neil Macgregor, former Director of the British Museum, thinks that "the discovery of the art of Ife is a supreme example of a widespread cultural phenomenon: that as we discover our past, so we discover ourselves⁵²."

Central and West Asia: Winged Lions of Nimrud, Oxus Treasure

Not with much difference from the situation of the African nations during the 'Scramble for Africa', the Middle east and Central Asia faced the unscrupulous imperialist-colonialist movements of Western powers over centuries. The competition among British, French and Russian forces over the region triggered a race of cultural domination as well, which resulted in the plunder and translocation of a great number of cultural artefacts to Western museums and private collections. Speaking of the British Museum, the number of artefacts stored there from the country of Iraq itself accounts for about 164,000, making it the largest contributor to the Museum's collection, and those from Türkiye reach up to above 73,000, effectively making the country the fifth largest single contributor⁵³.

Part of Sumerian and Assyrian mythology and religions since around 2000 BC, Lamassu, or the winged lions/bulls were typically placed in prominent pairs at palatial entrances in Assyrian sculpture. From the front, they appear to be standing, and from the rear, to be walking. The British Museum houses a pair of those enormous 9th century BC sculptures of winged lions with stylised human heads and long beards, which previously guarded the throne room of King Ashurbanipal in the city of Nimrud. It was excavated by Austen Henry Layard in the late 1840s/early 1850s, and was acquired by the British Museum in 1851⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>.

⁵¹ Through Eternity Tours. (n.d.). Highlights of the British Museum. <https://www.througheternity.com/en/blog/history/Highlights-of-the-British-Museum.html>.

⁵² MacGregor, N. (2010). *A history of the world in 100 objects*. Penguin Books.

⁵³ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>.

⁵⁴ Through Eternity Tours. (n.d.). Highlights of the British Museum. <https://www.througheternity.com/en/blog/history/Highlights-of-the-British-Museum.html>. See also McKee, G. (n.d.). Austen Henry Layard and the early exploration of Nimrud. *Institute for the Study of the Ancient World*. <https://isaw.nyu.edu/library/blog/Layard>.

The Oxus treasure in an Achaemenid collection of over 180 pieces of gold and silver metalwork that were found by the banks of Oxus River about 1877⁵⁵. They were discovered near the town of Takht-i-Sangin, Tajikistan, and feature griffin armlets, a scabbard, an Egyptian model horse chariot, a gold fish, and some minor, yet remarkable, statuettes⁵⁶. The general consensus is that the Oxus treasure is representative of some of the finest metallurgic artwork from that time⁵⁷.

Repatriation Requests Over Cultural Treasures

With the growing global consciousness regarding national and cultural identity, repatriation requests have been made formally by numerous nations in regard of their stolen treasures. By equipping the States Parties with framework “to prohibit and prevent the import, export, and transfer of cultural property, as well as encourage its return and restitution”, the 1970 UNESCO Convention has become increasingly significant in the face of emerging challenges to protection of cultural heritage from theft and illicit trading⁵⁸. The vast majority of the British Museum's 8 million items collection come from countries outside the UK, and great portion of them was appropriated through improper - even dirty and sinful at times - means, thanks to which the Museum has earned the nickname for being the “world's largest receiver of stolen goods” which exhibits “stolen cultural property⁵⁹.”

The British Museum is the ultimate single destination for archaeology, anthropology, colonialism, and mounting calls for repatriation, thanks to its international standing and the historical significance of its collections⁶⁰. The main stimulus for repatriation claims has its roots in the very fact that the former colonies - along with its indigenous, minority, and suppressed cultures- were unable to resist the original removal of their historical objects and cultural treasures⁶¹. When an ancient piece of art is translocated off its natural setting, it still retains its value and archaeological interest; but the historical and aesthetic value of an object is closely tied to its original setting.

Colleen Margaret Clarke and Eli Jacob Szydlo quotes Hayes Scriven to have said that “(T)he museums give a cultural identity, and a background that goes into our national and cultural identities, the community needs to witness these artefacts in order to fully understand their impact on our society, and on ourselves as

⁵⁵ World History Encyclopedia. (n.d.). The Oxus Treasure. https://www.worldhistory.org/Oxus_Treasure/.

⁵⁶ Al Jazeera. (2023, August 31). Where do items in the British Museum come from? <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/31/where-do-items-in-the-british-museum-come-from-2>.

⁵⁷ World History Encyclopedia. (n.d.). The Oxus Treasure. https://www.worldhistory.org/Oxus_Treasure/.

⁵⁸ UNESCO. (n.d.). Returning the loot. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/returning-loot-o>.

⁵⁹ Global Times. (2023, August). British Museum must return Chinese cultural relics for free. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1297079.shtml>.

⁶⁰ Peabody Museum News. (2024, August 12). Top ten repatriation edition. <https://peabody.andover.edu/2024/08/12/british-museum-top-ten-repatriation-edition/>.

⁶¹ Duthie, E. (2011). The British Museum: An imperial museum in a post-imperial world. *Public History Review*, 18.

individuals within the larger context⁶².” During the height of the British empire, London had amassed a sea-vast collection of cultural artefacts from colonized or occupied nations, the acquisitions of the most of which were often justified as preservation efforts or gifts, but in matter of fact were forcibly taken or acquired under coercive conditions and agreements.

However, the global pressure for decolonization and restitution is growing. Multiple countries have become active in repatriation claims over their artefacts now stored in the British Museum, among which countries like Greece, India, Egypt, and China stand at the forefront. These debates reflect the growing recognition that cultural heritage rights extend beyond simplistic legal ownership to address spiritual, cultural, and communal affiliations that transcend Western concepts of property.

The British Museum has been vehemently criticized for its sharp refusal to send back the Parthenon Marbles to their Greek homeland. The case of rightful ownership of the Marbles is no longer limited to Greece and Britain. The European Union in early 2020 and China in late 2019 had expressed support to Greece on the repatriation of the Parthenon sculptures with staunch voice⁶³. Christopher Hitchens argues that these objects were removed from their natural setting and from the space they could have occupied naturally, if had been left untouched⁶⁴. It was in 1983 that the Greek government, represented by the then-Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, requested for the repatriation of the Elgin marbles, effectively becoming the first official request from the Greek government for the purpose. But it was officially declined by the British government in 1984⁶⁵. Greece had pushed for the return of the sculptures and marbles numerous times. It has also opened a new museum at Athens to display these panels in 2009, namely the Acropolis Museum, where a large space is devoted for the Parthenon, and the pieces removed by Elgin are now represented by plaster casts⁶⁶.

The Rosetta Stone for the British Museum is what the famous painting of Mona Lisa is for the Louvre Museum, being the single most-visited object in the Museum. At least two large-scale petitions were organized in favour of the restitution of the Rosetta stone, with one of them garnering over 100,000 signatures in support⁶⁷. But the British Museum argued that the 1801 treaty included legally transferred ownership of the stone from the French to the British. In 2005, the British Museum had presented Egypt with a life-size fibreglass colour-matched replica of the Rosetta

⁶² Clarke, C. M., & Szydlo, E. J. (n.d.). *Stealing history: Art theft, looting, and other crimes against our cultural heritage*.

⁶³ Godwin, H. R. (2020). Legal complications of repatriation at the British Museum. *Washington International Law Journal*, 30, 144.

⁶⁴ Duthie, E. (2011). The British Museum: An imperial museum in a post-imperial world. *Public History Review*, 18.

⁶⁵ Merryman, J. H. (Ed.). (2009). *Thinking about the Elgin Marbles: Critical essays on cultural property, art and law* (2nd ed.). Kluwer Law International.

⁶⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (n.d.). Elgin Marbles. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <http://britannica.com/topic/Elgin-Marbles>.

⁶⁷ Peabody Museum News. (2024, August 12). Top ten repatriation edition. <https://peabody.andover.edu/2024/08/12/british-museum-top-ten-repatriation-edition/>.

stone in order to be displayed in the Rashid National Museum in what was formerly Rosetta⁶⁸.

Historian William Dalrymple reportedly told that he was “actually against in principle the idea of emptying of museums across the world and sending everything back home to where they come from.” Professor Michael Liversidge says that the Elgin Marbles don't just stand for Greece, but they are “emblematic of Western values in the widest sense⁶⁹.” To supplement with, more people visit the Parthenon Marbles at the British Museum than visit the Parthenon itself or the Acropolis Museum at Athens.

Similar to the cases of the Rosetta stone and the Elgin Marbles, the list of contested artefacts in the British Museum include the Oxus treasure, the Benin Bronzes, the Diamond Sutra, the Dunhuang manuscripts, and Hoa Hakananai'a. The Nigerian government had passed a resolution that demands the restitution of all 700 bronze pieces shipped away from Benin. Likewise, People's Republic of China and Tajikistan among others have also raised claims over their stolen artefacts and cultural treasures.

British Museum Act 1963

Despite international diplomatic pressure and repeated pleas for restitution, the British Museum has generally adopted to turn its back on its ‘cultural creditors’. The British Museum is prevented by law from returning any object or artefact in its collection permanently, except in extremely limited circumstances⁷⁰. The repatriation claims raised by other countries have increased significantly following the British Museum scandal of 2023 when it revealed that some of its artefacts be gone missing, and that ‘some’ turned out to be around or exceeding 2000 in numbers⁷¹.

The British Museum Act 1963 prevents the Museum and its trustees from the restitution of any object in the collection of the Museum unless it is a duplicate, physically damaged, or unfit to be retained in the collection, and no longer of public interest⁷². Similarly, the National Heritage Act of 1983 prevents the Victoria and Albert Museum from legally returning the artefacts in its storage⁷³.

⁶⁸ El-Aref, N. (2005, November 30). The rose of the Nile. *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

⁶⁹ Rediff News. (2018, July 18). Why the British Museum won't return the Harihara. <https://www.rediff.com/news/special/why-the-british-museum-wont-return-the-harihara/20180718.htm>.

⁷⁰ The Telegraph. (2024, April 1). British Museum in private talks with governments over returning artefacts. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/01/british-museum-talks-with-governments-over-return-artefacts/>.

⁷¹ “British Museum's Decisive Year: A 2023 Filled with a Lot of Scandal, and Not Enough Change.” (2023, January 25). *ARTnews*. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/british-museums-scandal-reputational-damage-george-osborne-1234690418/>.

⁷² Observer. (2023, February). The UK has a 60-year-old law prohibiting repatriation of art – Is that about to change? <https://observer.com/2023/02/the-uk-has-a-60-year-old-law-prohibiting-repatriation-of-art-is-that-about-to-change/>. See also “British Museum Act 1963.” (n.d.). *British Museum*. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/British-Museum-Act-1963.pdf>.

⁷³ Forbes. (2024, January 25). British Museum lends Ghana looted gold artifacts. Here's why it won't fully return them. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zacharyfolk/2024/01/25/british-museum-lends-ghana-looted-gold-artifacts-heres-why-it-wont-fully-return-them/>.

Vijay Kumar says that the "British Museum is still holding on to its colonial past, as in the case of the Benin bronzes and the Parthenon sculptures⁷⁴." By the nineteenth century, the British Museum had become a powerful symbol of the British empire and the representations of world cultures it offered were deeply permeated with the culture of British imperialism, and it had developed to become an imperial archive, rather than a national public museum⁷⁵. Unfortunately, the 1970 UNESCO Convention applies only to cultural property illicitly acquired or appropriated at least three months after a state has become a party to the treaty, which also helps the Museum to retain its stolen artefacts in display⁷⁶.

CONCLUSION

The extractive or exploitative colonialism pursued by the British Empire was followed by a systematic state-sponsored historical, cultural, and epistemological theft in the colonized nations. Just as the British succeeded in breastfeeding London with the economies of the colonized or occupied regions, they didn't fail in rampaging over hundreds of cultures and a myriad of values as well.

The British colonialism also brought about the dirty tradition of preserving world heritage in the British soil, that costed the mankind the loss of a significant portion of its social and cultural history. The British Museum abounds in what call out to the world the exploits and colonial legacy of the British empire, and how it trampled over what it considered subaltern and subordinate. Despite international pressure in favour of restitution and numerous requests for repatriation, the British Museum purposefully hides its face unscrupulously behind a handful of governmental provisions, the most important of them being the British Museum Act 1963. Considered ground zero in archaeology and ethnography, the Museum has collections from around 212 countries other than the UK, making it, literally, a world museum. Yet, the questions about and debates over the rightful ownership over a great number of artefacts remain unaddressed and unanswered in the way they deserve.

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⁷⁴ India Today. (2024, July 7). Repatriation and India Pride Project: Looted gods and colonial heritage. <https://www.indiatoday.in/sunday-special/story/repatriation-india-pride-project-looted-smuggled-gods-statues-colonial-rule-heritage-vijay-kumar-british-museums-2563311-2024-07-07>.

⁷⁵ Duthie, E. (2011). The British Museum: An imperial museum in a post-imperial world. *Public History Review*, 18.

⁷⁶ Godwin, H. R. (2020). Legal complications of repatriation at the British Museum. *Washington International Law Journal*, 30, 144.

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