



DEBATING MATTERS

sixth-form debating competition

DEBATING MATTERS TOPIC GUIDE

“Western museums should repatriate cultural artefacts”

INTRODUCTION

In November 2018, a report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron caused a debate when it concluded that French museums should return to Africa thousands of artefacts taken during colonialism [Ref: [Financial Times](#)]. The report’s authors were frank: continuing to hold such treasures amounts to depriving African people of the “spiritual nourishment that is the foundation of their humanity” where “Africans find themselves struggling to recover the thread of an interrupted memory” Ref [Ref: [Restitution Report](#)]. Macron endorsed the report, and agreed to immediately return 26 artworks to the Kingdom of Benin [Ref: [Reuters](#)].

The report re-ignited an ongoing debate about the housing of cultural artefacts in museums miles away from their place of origin, often taken by colonial authorities or acquired through other unjust means. This debate echoed one that emerged earlier in 2018 when Monika Grutters, Germany’s minister for culture, published guidelines for dealing with colonial-era artefacts that urged museums to retribute artefacts [Ref: [ArtNet](#)]. Indeed, the restitution of Jewish works stolen by the Nazis in many ways set the tone for the debate as a whole [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]. Nonetheless, the restitution of colonial-era artefacts is in many ways more wide-ranging than the question of restitution to Nazi victims.

In December of 2018, the British Museum announced it would return its collection of Benin Bronzes to Nigeria under a loan agreement [Ref: [CNN](#)]. Aside from the Benin Bronzes, the British Museum has been under pressure regarding the

Parthenon Marbles, which have long been such a point of controversy [Ref: [National Geographic](#)]. Most recently, Greece has taken the opportunity provided by Brexit to repeat its claim to the world-famous treasures [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)].

Although the Marbles remain a cause célèbre in the controversy about repatriation of artefacts, there are many other contested objects [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. The governor of Easter Island has appealed to the British Museum to return a statue, arguing the museum ‘has our soul’ [Ref: [CNN](#)]. Egypt’s chief archaeologist Zahi Hawass has demanded the return of the Nefertiti bust from the Neues Museum in Berlin, and secured the return of fresco fragments from the Louvre [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. Several years ago, the Scottish National Party argued that the entire set of the Lewis Chessman [Ref: [BBC News](#)] belongs in Scotland and should be returned from the British Museum [Ref: [Scotsman](#)].

The importance of preserving the world’s cultural artefacts remains a sensitive issue following the destruction of the ancient Assyrian archaeological site of Nimrud [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and then of Palmyra in Syria [Ref: [Guardian](#)] by Islamic State (ISIS). Syrian archaeologists are now attempting to restore the ruins at Palmyra [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], now reclaimed from ISIS militants by Syrian and Russian forces, and the Syrian government is seeking to reclaim and display antiquities stolen and sold on the black market by ISIS [Ref: [Reuters](#)].

Such events, some argued at the time, should serve as a “wake-up call” to Western museums to be protective of their collections and unapologetic in disputes over contested remains because “important antiquities should be treated as the common property of mankind” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] – a sentiment which runs counter to that expressed in the Macron-backed report, which has cultural artefacts properly belonging to specific cultural groups. So do cultural artefacts belong in their country of origin, to be viewed and appreciated in the context in which they were made? Or are contested artefacts such as the Elgin Marbles part of a larger tapestry of world culture, which Western museums should keep, and preserve for us all?

DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

What is the role of museums?

Many of the world's most famous museums were founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collecting objects that would offer a comprehensive knowledge of the world. In our post-colonial era, it has been argued that their role is no longer clear and straightforward. Museums find themselves in the middle of a debate about what should take priority: principles of universal understanding and academic research, where objects are curated together to tell "not just the history of the local or national parish, but all history, all learning, all human expression" [Ref: [The Times](#)] or, in contemporary society, whether it is "proper to remove a work from its original cultural setting, losing its context?" [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. The British Museum and others argue that they exist to promote universal understanding of our shared human history, and that this requires maintaining the integrity of their existing collections [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. These encyclopaedic museums, it is argued, transcend national and cultural boundaries and that "culture, while it can have deeply rooted, special meanings to specific people, doesn't belong to anyone in the grand scheme of things. It doesn't stand still" [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. But critics of this outlook challenge the idea that such collections need to be housed in Western museums, because "world-class museums are not held by some act of God to Northern Europe or North America" [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

What are the arguments for the repatriation of cultural artefacts?

Advocates argue that repatriation of artefacts contributes towards making reparations for historical wrongs, and builds a new diplomacy between nations and people [Ref: [US News](#)]. Writer Helena Smith suggests that disputed artefacts are best understood and appreciated in the context of their place of origin, stating: "Every country has the right after all, to the heritage that is an inherent part of its cultural identity" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. She concludes, in relation to the Parthenon Marbles: "Ownership of objects is no longer important, and the Greeks are willing to put that issue aside...what is far more important is context, appreciating artworks in their places of birth" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. This view is supported by Ghanaian writer Kwame Opoku, who argues: "Those Western museums and governments that are busy proclaiming their wishes to celebrate with Nigeria and other African states...independence could follow their words with concrete actions by sending some African artefacts back to their countries of origin" [Ref: [Museum Security Network](#)]. Similarly, even some museums believe that successful acts of repatriation can symbolise our common humanity, building relationships with indigenous communities, and righting historical wrongs [Ref: [Australian Government](#)]. Another aspect to the discussion is that many of the artefacts in question, such as the Benin Bronzes [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)],

have complex and morally ambiguous histories. Indeed, asks Jenkins: “The objects campaigners want to be returned, to apologise for colonisation, then, were crafted on the back of the slave trade. Following the logic of righting historical wrongs, aren’t these artworks tainted by that immoral practice?” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In contrast, supporters of repatriation contend that by holding on to these ‘spoils of war’ Western museums continue to benefit from, and therefore validate, their colonial legacy, with the Elgin Marbles in particular representing “a sad reminder of cultural imperialism” [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. “In the end”, as one commentator opines, “the defence for hanging onto contested cultural goods boils down to the deeply offensive notion that Britain looks after the Parthenon Marbles, or Benin Heads and plaques better than Greece or Nigeria ever could” [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

On what grounds are the retention of collections defended?

Historian and curator James Cuno outlines the case against repatriation by arguing that culture is universal, and by mounting a robust defence of Western museum collections. He observes: “By presenting the artefacts of one time and culture next to those of other times and cultures, encyclopaedic museums encourage curiosity about the world and its many people” [Ref: [Foreign Affairs](#)]. Art critic Jonathan Jones concurs, noting that placing artefacts in a new context gives them an added significance “as part of humanity’s heritage” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] to be enjoyed by everyone. Moreover, “In our post-modern, post-nationalist world, it’s all about interaction and hybridisation, about celebrating the diverse cultural components that make up each of us...it means that the Parthenon Marbles are as much British as they are Greek” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. For some, arguments for repatriation are directly opposed to a universal understanding of culture – and exposes the trend for the explicit politicisation of culture and art, which leads to “divisive identity politics”, where it is assumed that “certain people have a special relationship to particular objects, owing to their ethnic identity” [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. Unfortunately, as one commentator laments: “Globalisation, it turns out has only intensified, not diminished cultural differences among nations”, as shown by governments now seeking to “exploit culture” for their own political purposes [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. “The idea that certain objects belong to certain ethnic groups is destructive”, argues commentator Tiffany Jenkins “and obscures the universal nature of mankind, the fact that we can abstract ourselves from our particular circumstances and appreciate the creation of all human civilisations” [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. There are also practical problems involved in repatriation – for example, modern Greece is very different from the nation which existed in the nineteenth century, let alone Ancient Greece: so who would we rightfully return artefacts to? American critic Michael

Kimmelman asks “why should any objects necessarily reside in the modern nation-state controlling the plot of land where, at one time, perhaps thousands of years earlier, they came from?” [Ref: [New York Times](#)].

Who owns culture?

Contemporary demands for restitution, some argue, are driven by contemporary political grievances and that giving in to an understandable desire to right the wrongs of the past via the repatriation of objects will distract from, and do little to challenge, the problems historically wronged groups face today [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Arguably, the very meaning and purpose of museums is at stake in this debate, with some arguing that “perhaps it is time for museums to start speaking up for civilisation” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and asking whether humanity’s cultural heritage belongs to just some of us, or all of us, and how we might best protect, share and understand it [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. How should we view cultural artefacts, and how do we decide who owns or displays them? Are they best seen as universal objects housed in predominantly Western museums which embody “openness, tolerance, and inquiry about the world, along with the recognition that culture exists independent of nationalism” [Ref: [Foreign Affairs](#)]? Or should these contested artefacts be returned to their points of origin, allowing the works to be housed and perhaps better understood in their original context, because ultimately, “museums need to face up to a reality. Cultural imperialism is dead. They cannot any longer coldly keep hold of artistic treasures that were acquired in dubious circumstances a long time ago” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]?

ESSENTIAL READING

It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.

FOR

Give the Easter Islanders their statue back – it doesn’t belong in the British Museum

Simon Jenkins **The Guardian** 24 November 2018

Returning looted artefacts will finally restore heritage to the brilliant cultures that made them

Mark Horton **The Conversation** 23 November 2018

The British Museum Should Return The Parthenon Marbles To Greece

Leila Amineddoleh **Forbes** 23 December 2014

The art world shame: why Britain should give its colonial booty back

Jonathan Jones **Guardian** 4 November 2014

AGAINST

Why western museums should keep their treasures

Tiffany Jenkins **The Guardian** 25 November 2018

Why the British Museum should keep the Elgin Marbles

Wendy Earle **Spiked** 12 June 2018

The Case Against Repatriating Museum Artefacts

James Cuno **Foreign Affairs** December 2014

The Elgin Marbles – Why their home is here

Mark Hudson **Telegraph** 13 February 2014

IN DEPTH

How the Parthenon Lost Its Marbles

Juan Pablo Sanchez **National Geographic** 30 April 2018

Art stolen by the Nazis is still missing. Here's how we can recover it.

Stuart E. Eizenstat **Washington Post** 2 January 2018

Who draws the borders of culture?

James Kimmelman **New York Times** 5 May 2010

BACKGROUNDEERS

Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.

British Museum to return Benin bronzes to Nigeria

Kieron Monks **CNN** 14 December 2018

Art repatriation: Colonial ghosts haunt German and other European museums

Various **The Local DE** 22 November 2018

'You have our soul': Easter Island pleads with British for statue's return

Oscar Holland **CNN** 22 November 2018

The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics

Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy **The Ministry of Culture of the French Republic**
1 November 2018

Palmyra priest statue among haul of recovered Syrian relics

Kinda Makieh **Reuters** 4 October 2018

Syrian archaeologists begin restoring Palmyra artefacts destroyed by Isis

Josie Ensor **Telegraph** 9 July 2018

France urged to return museum artefacts to Africa

David Pilling **Financial Times** 23 April 2018

Cultural appropriation: compliment or theft?

Battle of Ideas **Academy of Ideas** 15 April 2018

The sad story behind Egypt's ugly Nefertiti Statue

Gogo Lidz **Newsweek** 8 July 2015

We must save Palmyra or the maniacs will raze civilisation

Boris Johnson **Telegraph** 17 May 2015

Parthenon Marbles: Greece's claim is nationalism rhetoric and deserves to fail

Jonathan Jones **Guardian** 14 May 2015

Preservation or plunder? The battle over the British Museum's Indigenous Australian show

Paul Daley **Guardian** 9 April 2015

Neil MacGregor saved the British Museum. It's time to reinvent it again

Jonathan Jones **Guardian** 8 April 2015

Artefacts as instruments of nationalism

James Cuno **New York Times** 21 January 2015

The British Museum is right to keep its marbles

David Aaronovitch **The Times** 8 December 2014

We ask the experts: why do we put things into museums?

University of Cambridge 26 November 2013

Ill-gotten gains: how many museums have stolen objects in their collections?

Carl Franzen **The Verge** 13 May 2013

Send them back

intelligence Squared **The Economist** 11 June 2012

IN THE NEWS

Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.

France returns 26 artworks to Benin as report urges restitution

Aaron Ross **Reuters** 23 October 2018

Greece launches fresh bid to reclaim Elgin marbles from Britain

James Tapsfield **Daily Mail** 22 August 2018

German museum returns stolen artifacts to Native American tribe

Danielle Haynes **UPI** 11 June 2018

ISIS Releases Photos of Temple Destruction in Palmyra

Algemeiner 25 August 2015

As ISIS smashes history, curators battle to save threatened antiquities

CBC News 14 April 2015

Court sits at British Museum for first time as judge studies looted Libyan sculpture

Telegraph 30 March 2015

Ankara Demands Artifacts from Berlin

Various **Spiegel** 14 March 2014

AUDIO/VISUAL

Cultural appropriation: compliment or theft?

Battle of Ideas **Academy of Ideas** 15 April 2018

Send them back

Intelligence Squared **The Economist** 11 June 2012