

*Social, Humanitarian, & Cultural Committee
(SOCHUM)*



*Discussing the
management of museum
collections
in Europe.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Committee (SOCHUM) takes part of one of the many subcommittees within the General Assembly (GA). It is often referred to as the Third Committee. It seeks the resolution of conflicts that affect people worldwide in terms of human rights from a social, humanitarian, and cultural scope and works as the assessor of the resolutions of the Human Rights Council (HRC) (United Nations, n.d.). It was founded in 1945 to make sure that, with the General Assembly, human rights were a priority which led to the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ever since, it promotes international liberty and freedom for individuals that are related to the safeguarding of children's rights, social development, cultural expression, and political participation (European people, n.d.).

The committee, with its 193 Member States, addresses the examination of human rights questions which include reports of the special procedures of the Human Rights Council (HRC). It also focuses on detailed objectives such as the promotion of freedoms by addressing the issues of racism and racial discrimination, women's development, protection of children, indigenous issues, refugees, people with disabilities, drug control, and crime management and justice prioritizing (United Nations, n.d.).

The Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Committee (SOCHUM), having a solid structure in the management of social, humanitarian, and cultural issues, addresses the unclear management of museum collections in Europe. European countries, during the colonial era, gathered artifacts that are currently exposed in the most recognized European museums such as the Musee Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Belgium, Humboldt Forum in Germany, Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac in France, British Museum in the United Kingdom, and Weltmuseum of Vienna in Austria. These museums offer a wide variety of looted artifacts that belong to nations all over the world such as Senegal, Chad, Benin, Congo, Greece, Indonesia, and India (Kimeria, 2019).

European museums, after constant public pressure from activists and national representatives, have been seeking ways to manage the artifacts that they withhold, questioning if they should be returned or not. Some museums are suggesting loaning the

artifacts as a way to find a mid-agreement instead of returning them completely. Part of why the management of the returning of the artifacts is complex and keeps European nations unwilling to return all the pieces is due to the lack of information to prove the artifacts were once stolen. This uncertainty has led European museums to hold the biggest collections of worldwide cultures until these days (Underwood, 2018).

The law-making process restricts as well the restitution of the artifacts as museums do not pass the proposal but the government as the pieces are State property. This process is what European nations such as Germany and France have been trying to simplify, seeking agreements with nations to which the artifacts belong to. There are activists of these nations that have publicly announced their unconformities arguing that the objects are part of their history and should not be exposed in a foreign country as it will not offer strength to their community neither a feeling of belonging as it will do if they were exposed on their country of origin (Clarke, 2021).

Aside from the fact that European nations look forward to loaning rather than returning artifacts, the preparedness of the nations claiming the objects is also questioned since the process of restoration and care of the objects is detailed and important to keep despite the region and the political, economical and social issues (McAuley, 2018). The discrepancies of who should own the artifacts weakens the government's political relationships and keeps it a current topic that keeps provoking manifestations within and out of museums as a way to show the disagreement that relies on cultural identity.

II. HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM

The most important European museums had gained their collections all over the beginning of the 15th century in the Age of Discovery when the first nations such as Portugal and Spain began conquering land in the Americas, India, Africa, and even Asia. Similarly, other powerful European nations such as England, the Netherlands, France, and Germany followed their path, taking control of wide land territories from which they extracted various artifacts from indigenous cultures due to their mineral value (Blakemore, 2019). Although more importantly, in the 1880s, European powers focused their attention

on African lands for their natural resources which led to the looting of artifacts of the indigenous communities that withhold the territories .

Britain, for example, developed an expedition by the explorer Richard Lander who looted the first artifact by Britain: a Yoruba stool from the Yoruba communities in Nigeria. Indeed, by 1895, most of the Yoruba kingdoms were captured and an expedition to the Benin Empire in current Nigeria led to a massacre with which Britain took control of the region and of important artifacts such as the Benin Bronzes that are made up of carved ivory, bronze, and brass crafted plaques (Gbadamosi, 2021). Artifacts that ended up in museums such as the British Museum, Berlin's Ethnological Museum, and the Weltmuseum in Vienna.

Furthermore, in 1872, Britain took control of the Kumasi royal palace on Gold Coast to acknowledge the tribe Asante about the rule they were imposed on. Due to this conflict, several items were looted, mainly made up of gold such as badges. In the same way, there are multiple other examples such as in Kenya where Britain executed Nandi Chief Koitalel Arap Somoei and his skull, important to Kenya's history, that was taken to London with around 32,000 other objects. Without mentioning in 1902, when Britain looted the Ngadiji, a sacred drum part of the Pokomo people of Kenya's Tana River valley (Gbadamosi, 2021).

Another nation that suffered the British control was Ethiopia (Abyssinia) in 1868, the year in which the British army took The Magdala treasures, including an 18th-century gold crown commissioned by the Empress Mentewab in 1740 as a gift to a church in Gondar, and a royal wedding dress that belonged to Queen Woyzaro Terunesh. Other powerful nations such as Germany acquired artifacts through belic conflicts, such as the case of The Bangwa Queen which was looted by Gustav Conrau around 1899, a German colonial agent. (Lime, 2018) In the same way, Zimbabwe suffered the loot of soapstone sculptures of fish eagles that were part of the Shona people part of an ancient city of the 12th and 15th centuries and were gathered illegally by a German missionary that provided them to the German nation .

Another period where Germany acquired many looted artifacts was the Boxer Rebellion in China, in a counter-attack to the Boxers, a Chinese force dedicated to driving missionaries and foreigners out of China, the nations of Germany, France, and Britain stormed the Chinese Imperial Palace in Beijing, and many other places (Ming, 2022).

Other powerful nations such as France, have looted similarly in the African continent. A great example is the Four Doors of the Royal Palace of Abomey in Benin. These doors, commissioned by the King Glélé, were looted during the conquest of the Dahomeyan capital in 1892 by the French army and kept in the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro (MAD Aachen, Germany, 2022). Through these multiple examples, the evident loot by European nations such as Germany, Britain, The Netherlands, and France throughout history is shown, highlighting the necessity for objects to be returned.

iii. CURRENT SITUATION

Given the evident and constant pressure from nations that were illegally looted by European nations, there have been certain current agreements to return artifacts after deep investigations. Some of these agreements took place in October 2021, when the Jesus College of Cambridge returned to the Nigerian government a bronze sculpture of a cockerel that is part of the Benin Bronzes that have not yet been wholly returned by the United Kingdom. In the same way, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland returned the head of a king made of bronze which belonged as well to the Kingdom of Benin, currently known as Nigeria (Smith, 2021). These processes of agreements were possible due to Nigeria's public pressure by even forming an independent organization in 2020 called the Legacy Restoration Trust to develop negotiations with European museums, such as the University of Aberdeen, the Church of England, the National Museum of Ireland, and the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (Gbadamosi, 2021).

Similarly, Benin has successfully achieved the restitution by France of twenty-six artifacts such as three totemic statues, jewelry artifacts, a scepter, and a royal throne. This was made possible after France's President Emmanuel Macron's willingness to return

looted artifacts to African nations held by France. He has added as well that the work of restitution will continue with other ex-colonies of France such as Senegal (DW, 2021).

In addition to this, another country in process of restitution is Belgium, a nation that returned in February 2022 84,000 artifacts that belong to the Democratic Republic of Congo (Chow, 2022). This was made possible after a bill was approved in January 2022 that allows looted objects in federal collections to be stored in the state's private domain that seeks the restitution processes .

Unfortunately, there are still important artifacts such as the Parthenon Marbles in London that have been constantly claimed by Greece. The United Kingdom is not willing to return them as it would represent an irremediable loss to the British Museum that precisely portrays world history according to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Marshal, 2021). In addition, the 1964 law that governs the British Museum has weakened the process of restitution as there are specifications that do not permit the Parthenon Marbles to be removed. And although there are nations such as Germany, France, and Belgium that have already returned or that are in process of returning looted artifacts, the United Kingdom is mostly unwilling to join this process of restitution.

Regarding looted objects from parts of Asia, several museums in Germany are currently cooperating with the University of Shanghai to research different Asian origin artifacts and collections that are believed to be from the Boxer Rebellion and the storming of the Chinese Imperial Palace in the nineteenth century. These investigations are looking forward to finding the history of these artifacts and identifying which ones within the collections of the museums come from the Boxer Rebellion and the storming of the Chinese Imperial Place (Ming, 2022). This research also has the purpose to publish methodological guides to help other museums overlook their Chinese and Asian collections.

Another country that is facing action regarding their looted artifacts is India. In 2020, museums in the Netherlands supported a repatriation of looted objects to their place of origin. Within these objects, there are many paintings and statues. Although there have been some advancements in India's recollection of the looted artifacts, there are still some

objects that some countries refuse to return (Karla, 2020). The clearest example is the Kohinoor Diamond that's currently in hands of the British.

Regarding other Asian countries, Pakistan has also seen movement regarding its looted artifacts, in 2019 the French government gave Pakistan 445 artifacts valued at over 139,000 euros. These artifacts were being sent to a gallery in Paris and were intercepted by French customs officers, the artifacts were then reported and identified as objects looted from Pakistan. After this investigation the French Government decided to return these objects to Pakistan, making a ceremony in the Pakistan embassy in Paris. This comes to show France's and Emmanuel Macron's willingness to return the stolen and looted artifacts during French Colonialism (TRTWorld, 2019).

Many other countries are still going through the process of returning their different artifacts from Peru, Mexico, and Guatemala all the way to China and India. From different positions regarding the different objects, countries have agreed or denied the return or even recognized the history of looting said objects (Porterfield, 2022). The possibilities are cooperation from the country such as that of France returning the Ancient Mayan Stela to Guatemala or the denying of the history and the refusal such as Britain denying returning the Rosseta stone to Egypt.

IV. UN ACTIONS

After the decolonization period in the 1970s, the United Nations sought a way to enhance communication among European and mainly African and Asian nations. Due to that, in 1978, the UNESCO General Conference implemented an intergovernmental committee with the purpose of promoting communication and cooperation for the return of looted cultural property (UNESCO, 2009).

The United Nations has also strengthened treaties among nations for the returning of looted artifacts such as Article 37 of the 1947 Italian Peace Treaty for Italy to return the Obelisk of Axum to Ethiopia. The treaty was followed by a joint statement signed by both nations in 1997 in which previous treaties were confirmed and in which the UNESCO

World Heritage Center guided the process of restitution (Museum International, 2009). Similar actions have been taken into consideration by the United Nations trying to seek diplomatic agreements among nations who claim their culture was looted. In addition, another action by the United Nations addresses the cultural property looted from Iraq (UNESCO, 2009). This consisted of the United Nations Security Council adopting Resolution 1483 in 2003, which demanded all United Nations states facilitate the safe return of Iraqi property.

In the same way, sessions of the ICPRCP, the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property, have taken place and have been fostered by UNESCO. Indeed, the Twenty Third session took place from the 18th to the 20th of May 2022 with the purpose of promoting the restitution of artifacts illicitly appropriated mainly by European United Nations states (UNESCO, 2022). Throughout these sessions, multiple cases have been addressed by the United Nations to improve the process of restitution. Providing an example, in 2010, the committee discussed the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles from the United Kingdom to Greece, the restitution of the Sphinx of Bogusköy from Germany to Turkey, and the restitution of the Makonde Mask from Switzerland to Tanzania (United Nations News, 2010). This is how the United Nations has sought, through different programs like the ones described before, to develop good communication and agreements between countries, which is the most reachable solution yet.

V. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Although multiple agreements have been reached by nations, the uncertainty of whether some artifacts should be returned to their original location or not, or the lack of capacities for restoration and restitution processes, has weakened the resolution of the issue. The following list shows a variety of viable solutions to solve the issue in the long and short term:

01. Creating national programs dealing with the restitution and lending of the objects between the nations involved.

- a. This should be supervised with the help of the UNESCO's General Conference implementing an intergovernmental committee with the purpose of promoting communication and cooperation of all nations (UNESCO, 2009).
 - b. The program should be prioritized by the nation's governmental bodies to ensure the correct development of the necessary negotiations.
 - c. The programs will work to offer a way through which non-governmental organizations and independent activists could make public their concerns and their willingness to find a diplomatic method to solve the disagreements.
02. Organizing investigation projects developed with the cooperation of nation's governments and managed by non-governmental institutions (Ming, 2022).
- a. The purpose of said research projects would be to ensure, classify and confirm the history of the artifacts. The results of the investigations will guarantee a justification for the restitution of artifacts and worldwide pressure and hence, a non-negotiable restitution of them.
03. Promote the creation of government supported programs to investigate museum's management of artifacts with the cooperation of non-governmental institutions for the volunteering and research process. (Edson, 2004).
- a. These programs would investigate all the involved countries' capacities to manage, keep safe and safely display all items and artifacts in question, in order to ease the negotiations on the returning of artifacts to the countries affected.
 - b. The cooperation of all nations involved in the issue is required to facilitate the accessibility of historic documents, and other meaningful research tools for the process of investigation to be efficient and trustworthy.

04. Enhance the communication of affected nations with existing institutions such as the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPRCP) to seek for viable ways to communicate with European governmental institutions for the appropriate restitution of looted artifacts (UNESCO, 2022).
- a. An important aspect for the issue to be solved is the reachability of the demands of the nations affected. Demands that are supported by the ICPRCP as long as there is a solid argument and evidence that artifacts were looted.
 - b. For the issue to be solved in a short time period, nations should reach to existing institutions such as the one addressed previously that have already a solid influence and organization for the process to be successful and more importantly, diplomatic.

VI. COUNTRIES INVOLVED

1. French Republic

France currently has shown its support for the devolution of looted artifacts and has been shown with countries such as Pakistan, Guatemala, and Nigeria. For president Emmanuel Macron, it has been a priority to return looted artifacts to the point that France has returned 2014-2017 around 250 pieces of Egyptian antiquity to Cairo (TRTWorld, 2019). In the same way, the most known case has been the 26 looted treasures from Benin located in the Quai Branly museum. Treasures that French legislators have already allowed to be returned to their original places successfully in Africa. It is important the way the French Republic is taking action as this nation approximately has 90,000 African artifacts in its territory, of which around 70,000 are in the Quai Branly museum. With this considerable quantity of looted artifacts, it is portrayed the role of the French Republic to return looted artifacts to the places that have requested them (AlJazeera, 2021).

2. Federal Republic of Germany

Germany currently holds a serious amount of different looted artifacts, but is currently on the development of certain investigations to search into the artifacts history and the devolution and treatment of all looted artifacts (Ming, 2022).

3. Hellenic Greece

Greece currently is struggling regarding the devolution of their looted artifacts mainly by the United Kingdom. Although there have been many attempts for a solution, the United Kingdom's stance remains that it will not return the Marbles of the Pantheon and other looted artifacts from Greece (Marshal, 2021).

4. Federal Republic of Nigeria

Although Nigeria has taken some action regarding the recuperation of its looted artifacts like the mask returned by the Jesus College of Cambridge that's part of the Benin Bronzes, there are still lots of missing parts of the Benin Bronzes that the United Kingdom still refuses to return in its completion (Smith, 2021).

5. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The United Kingdom currently holds most of the current looted artworks and artifacts and is not willing to return them as it would represent an irremediable loss to the British Museum that precisely portrays world history according to the prime minister Boris Johnson. In addition, the 1964 law that governs the British Museum has weakened the process of restitution as there are specifications that do not permit the Parthenon Marbles to be removed. The United Kingdom is mostly unwilling to join this process of restitution (Marshal, 2021).

6. Republic of Benin
7. Democratic Republic of Congo
8. Arab Republic of Egypt
9. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
10. Republic of Guatemala
11. Republic of India
12. Republic of Iraq
13. Republic of Italy
14. Republic of Kenya
15. Kingdom of Morocco
16. United Mexican States
17. Republic of Perú
18. Syrian Arab Republic
19. Republic of Turkey
20. Kingdom of Belgium
21. People's Republic of China
22. Kingdom of the Netherlands
23. Islamic Republic of Pakistan
24. Republic of Korea
25. United States of America

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