

Culture and History Under The Shadow of Colonialism: The British Museum

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Located in London, England; the British Museum is one of the largest and most popular museums in the entire world. One of the most recognizable landmarks in London and an extremely popular tourist attraction, its worldwide cultural impact is not to be underestimated. The roots of its great significance and wide allure lie for the largest part in its collection, the museum having over eight million items in its collection. (1) Yet, the large catalog of items is also a point of contention. The British Museum is surrounded by controversy regarding its roots in colonialism, which is not surprising, seeing that it has “British” in the name. The main argument of those that accuse the museum is that while the museum might be British, its contents are anything but. A large part of the collection of the museum is artifacts, sometimes quite important, that belong to other cultures that the British have somehow acquired over the years. This “somehow” usually denotes methods that are less than ethical, which adds to the magnitude of the controversy. To really understand how the museum scooped up these important artifacts, let us consider two separate cases.

The first case is the acquisition of the Parthenon Marbles of Greece. Initially a part of the Parthenon in Athens, the marble sculptures were brought to Britain at the beginning of the 19th century. Thomas Bruce brought with himself the sculptures to Britain via sea route from Greek lands, which were then in control of the Ottoman Empire. Bruce was at the time the Earl of Elgin, and indeed the marbles are also referred to as the “Elgin Marbles” but I have chosen not to reproduce this act of naming, as I believe it would put me in the same category as the British Museum, which I am criticizing right now. In any case, Bruce later tried to legitimize his plundering by claiming that he had a decree from the Ottoman Sultan allowing him to take to Britain the Marbles in the Parthenon. This claim has been thoroughly criticized since Ottoman records do not seem to hold any such decree, despite the importance given to decrees at the time. (2) A lot of things have been said about Bruce’s actions, but the general consensus is that he did not have legitimate reasons to believe that whatever he was doing was anything but theft.

As for the importance of the artifact, I believe seeing any picture of the Parthenon Marbles will convince the reader of their importance, and that is why I included one in the article, but we can also take an alternative approach. Since Greece gained its independence in 1832, various monarchs and governments have tried, with little success, to bring the marbles back home. They are still trying to reunite the Marbles with their homeland, and remain steadfast despite the difficulties that The British Museum has given them, if the official statement of their Ministry of Culture and Sports is anything to go by. (3) The importance of the Marbles have also been internationally recognized many times, for example, UNESCO recognizes it as one of the most important artifacts from the ancient world. (4) Despite all this however, the British remain adamant on not returning the artifact.



The second case of interest is the Rosetta Stone. The Rosetta Stone was most extensively studied after the end of the 18th century and was key to understanding ancient Egyptian texts, as it contained the same decree written in both ancient Greek and ancient Egyptian. Researchers used this to gain a greater understanding of ancient Egyptian and the stone has been a key in deciphering further documents. For this reason you may often see the name Rosetta, or even the full Rosetta Stone as the name of cipher keys or translation tools. You can also spot various references to it in popular media as well, such is the level that it has permeated through all forms of culture. It is also popular among the contents of the British Museum, where it is the most visited object. (5) Despite being the most visited object in the British Museum, it is markedly not British, as you will have noticed. So, how did it get there, then?

Well, at first, the French got their hands on the Rosetta Stone as part of their expedition to Egypt. However, in 1801 they were defeated by joint Ottoman and British forces. As a part of the Capitulation of Alexandria, the document containing the accepted terms of surrender, the British were allowed to take the Rosetta Stone. (6) Notice that aside from a disinterested Ottoman side, there was no one to represent the interests of Egypt. The French plundered the Stone, then the British came along and beat them in battle to take it from them, which is the most legitimate way to get a historical artifact for your country's collection, I assure you. Again, the government of the artifact's original location has tried to reclaim their cultural heritage, again, to no avail. The Egyptian government tried to negotiate for a return of the Rosetta Stone, even trying to create arrangements like a three month loan of the Stone, but ultimately, the British were unyielding, and any talk of permanently returning the Stone to Egypt was unproductive. (7)

In the end, much of the collection of the British Museum is pieces that were pilfered from their countries unjustly. The British simply took these artifacts home because they could, no mention of morality or legitimate reasons anywhere. It was the result of the colonialist outlook of the world at the time, and the fact that the British still keep them is a testament to

the fact that they have not abandoned their colonialist ways. I definitely do not buy the argument of everything being an event of the past now, because the British are still profiting from what they stole. I believe the moral path to take is to return all the plundered artifacts and denounce the colonialist links of Britain with said artifacts. It may be a very unrealistic desire, but it does not hurt to be on the right side of history.