

## The Question of Returning Artifacts to their Original Country

Repatriation is the return of stolen or looted cultural materials to their countries of origin. Repatriation claims are based on law but also restorative justice, the desire to right a wrong. This requires an admission of guilt, which often makes repatriation difficult, nations and institutions don't like admitting they were wrong. But people, groups, and countries are no longer accepting that they must buy back, bargain, and beg for their stolen artifacts. There has been a huge push for repatriation from colonialism and repatriations are now occurring at a rate never seen before, but not enough.

### Arguments for Repatriation

Repatriation is morally correct. Stolen property should be returned to its rightful owner. This is especially important with cultural objects. They belong with the cultures that created them and are hugely important in cultural and political identity. To not return objects stolen under colonialist regimes is to perpetuate colonialist ideologies that perceive colonized people as inherently inferior. This is made even worse because museums with international collections (universal museums) are in MEDCs, mostly places that are expensive to visit. This means a lot of the world cannot go and see the art, even people whose culture's objects are on display.

### Argument against Repatriation

Museums and collections have a few arguments they like to use when they hold objects they don't want to lose. They say if all museums returned objects to their countries of origin, a lot of museums would be nearly empty. They also say universal museums enable art from a lot of different places to be seen by many of people easily. They also argue that many objects originally came from ancient or historical kingdoms that no longer exist or spread across many modern national borders, like the ancient Roman empire. So, it is not clear where exactly objects should be repatriated. And even if it is clear what country objects should go to, they don't always have adequate facilities because of poverty and/or armed conflict so they are safer where they are now. Museums and collections also argue that many of their objects were legally obtained at the time of their acquisition and therefore have no reason to be repatriated despite our change of attitude about the ownership of cultural property.

### Legal Frameworks

The first legal framework recognising the damage of warfare to property was the 1907 Hague Convention, which forbade plundering of any kind during armed conflict. However, it did not deal specifically with cultural property. Then the 1954 Hague Convention, after World War Two the widespread destruction of art during. This sought to expressly protect cultural property during armed conflict. The 1970 UNESCO Convention allowed for stolen objects to be seized if there was proof of ownership. The 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects calls for the return of illegally excavated and exported cultural property. Without these conventions and treaties, there would be no legal obligation for the return of anything. Nationally, The Native American Graves and Protection Repatriation Act, and the Indigenous Repatriation Program were enacted in the US and Australia to set up frameworks for the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of objects and human remains to Indigenous communities.

### Conclusion

Giving back stolen artifacts is the morally right thing to do. But there are many factors to consider. Some museums are extremely reluctant (especially in the UK) to repatriate artifacts despite repeatedly being asked to. Communication between museums and artifacts' countries of origin is hugely important. Museums should be transparent with what artifacts they hold and how they were obtained. Many museums are also investigating if their artifacts were legally obtained. Not all countries have the facilities to safely display the artifacts that are rightly theirs, but they could be supported to do so or make fair agreements with other countries to display and protect them somewhere else. Legal framework could also be edited and updated, nationally and internationally. It is a personal, national, and international issue related to morality, nationhood, and identity, and so needs to be treated with respect.