

Supermarket Sweep with a twist: let countries grab back looted art

David Sanderson, Arts Correspondent at the Hay Festival



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The British Museum holds treasures from around the world such as the Elgin Marbles from Greece and Benin bronzes from what is now Nigeria.

With rancour (*Groll*) remaining over Britain's seizure of the world's riches during the days of empire, a solution has been offered: a special edition of *Supermarket Sweep* in the British Museum.

A presenter of BBC's *Civilisations* has suggested that aggrieved countries whose artefacts were appropriated could be given two minutes in the museum with a shopping trolley to grab back lost treasures.

David Olosuga suggested the "brilliant solution" as he argued that in a post-Brexit world the return of appropriated objects would help Britain to build trading relationships with countries whose cultural heritage was "taken in violent raids".

Olosuga, who presented *Civilisations* with Mary Beard and Simon Schama, said that he supported, for example, the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece along with the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria and items looted from China's Summer Palace. The historian said that Britain needed to confront its history and that it was in its interests in order to have financially beneficial relationships in the future.

"If the world is pivoting to Asia, if our relationships with Commonwealth countries after Brexit are going to be more important and remembering they remember what happened and what was taken and that there is a real sense of loss in those countries, then it is beneficial to us as a nation to listen to those appeals," he told the Hay Festival.

Olosuga, who is British-Nigerian, said that he felt strongly about the Benin Bronzes, many of which are held by the British Museum. They were seized by a British expeditionary force in 1897 after Benin kingdom, now part of Nigeria, defied the British Empire by imposing customs duties. "I think it is a very, very clear case of appropriation and theft," he said.

“The palace was destroyed, they were taken and then sold to pay for the cost of the military adventure.

Everyone was open about this — steal this stuff, send it to pay for the cost of the bullets. It’s just such a stark case of theft.”

He said that about 4,000 objects, which he described as Nigeria’s “national treasures”, had been taken and were now in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States.

“The idea that your national treasure would be in the museum of another country is something that as British people we would find absolutely impossible to get our heads around, but that’s what Nigerians have to think about. The things that we regard as the greatest cultural artefacts, the greatest things we ever produced, our greatest works of art are in the museums of other countries, and we know the date they were taken and the circumstances they were taken.”

Olosuga added that even if only the objects held in storage and not on display were to be returned this would still allow Nigeria to have the “biggest collection”.

Cultural repatriation has become an increasingly fraught (*nervenaufreibend*) subject for British institutions.

President Macron of France has vowed to return all “looted” artefacts from his country’s museums to Africa. However, Tristram Hunt, director of the V&A, said that this “guilty all” approach was wrong and his counterpart at the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer, has ruled out the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece.

Olosuga said that in the national self-interest, museums needed to have a rethink. “I don’t know how sustainable it is, Europeans and Americans having these museums full of stuff that was taken in violent raids from other countries when those other countries are our trading partners, these countries we want to have and hope to have good relationships with and financially beneficial relationships with. Part of this need to confront this history and be honest about where this stuff comes from I say in some ways out of self-interest.

“A friend of mine, a TV producer, once came up with a brilliant solution: he said we should have a special version of *Supermarket Sweep* where every country is given a huge shopping trolley and two minutes in the British Museum. Maybe he’s right, maybe that’s the way forward.”

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/supermarket-sweep-with-a-twist-let-countries-grab-back-looted-art-sr703tj5l>