

Book Review

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Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis (eds), *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches*, London: Routledge, 2016, eBook £26.99, pp.204

In July 2010, the Manchester Museum hosted a conference of academics and museum professionals to discuss an important topic – Museums and Restitution. The conference addressed rising debates over the role of museums as agents of social justice and responsibility. Drawing a cast of seasoned veterans, 'Museums and Restitution' was transformed into an edited volume by Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis, originally published in 2014.

The introduction makes it clear: restitution is not a one-way street. Tythacott and Arvanitis present readers with the rocky landscape of restitution, from ethical disposals to the changing nature of audience engagement with collections, reminding us that while discussions of repatriation dominate the issue, there is no 'one-size-fits-all approach' (6). The editors acknowledge good work has already been done, with palpable change 'from museums representing indigenous communities to dialogue, listening and the incorporation of voices' (5). While it is impossible to address every approach to restitution, and discussions of legal procedures exist elsewhere, *Museums and Restitution* promises to illuminate 'the viewpoint of museums and professionals, focusing on new ways in which these institutions are addressing the subject' (2).

The volume is organized in three parts: Overviews, Perspectives from Around the World, and Reflections on Returns. After previewing each chapter, Tythacott and Arvanitis indicate what unites the contributors' arguments. 'Many authors in this volume,' they state, 'argue that museums need both to move beyond their present stances and critically reflect on the value, benefits and challenges of their developing perceptions and practices of restitution' (13). Across international perspectives, there is an underlying thread: restitution is not only a policy to redress the past, but a practice to shape the future.

Part one, 'Overviews', includes two sweeping chapters about the significance of restitution. Tristram Besterman's essay considers the argument espoused by universal museums as they insist on retaining ill-gotten artefacts. Leaving a purely moral debate aside, Besterman reminds us of museums' roles as arbiters of democracy. Regardless of the form it takes, he argues restitution must become 'part of the process of constructive engagement between museums and their diverse communities of identity' (34), rather than institutions attached to the one-dimensional idea of universal heritage. Piotr Bienkowski's subsequent chapter explores authorized heritage discourses, and how the Western model of ownership and its accompanying red tape create an 'adversarial process' (47) that severely limits what restitution can look like. Although Besterman highlights the problems of universalist doctrine, and Bienkowski focuses on the 'criteria of ownership' (49), the authors make the same argument: museums must become more democratic.

Part two, 'Perspectives from Around the World', introduces the first case studies. In their chapter on the Sámi people, Eeva-Kristiina Harlin and Anne May Olli provide a wealth of historical context as they discuss the relatively recent inception of restitution practices in 'an area that is called *Sápmi*, the Sámi land' (55). Challenges related to collections management and the historical use of pesticides remind us that rhetoric about democracy and social justice only bear fruit if practical considerations such as health and safety are met. The Sámi know how to care for what is theirs, but facilitating this is unfinished work.

Conal McCarthy's chapter 'The Practice of Repatriation: A Case Study from New Zealand' is a firm call to action. Though the ultimate outcome of repatriation is uncertain,

the best way forward is learning by doing. 'Current museum practice is moving very quickly with repatriation', McCarthy states, 'and seems to be well ahead of museum history and theory, and scholars therefore need to look carefully at what is happening and consider the implications' (81). The case of *Te Hau ki Tūranga* meeting house illustrates how museums and communities can move through phases of discussion and disagreement – among themselves and with each other – to reach a beneficial decision, even if it is nowhere near a complete consensus. Ultimately 'the long term relationship' between museums and communities 'is the most important thing' (80).

This theme is picked up by Neil Curtis in his chapter on repatriation cases related to human remains in Scottish museums. With experience developing model repatriation guidance, Curtis insists that moving beyond rigidly defined categories of artefacts – and people – can empower claimants in their quests for restitution and create mutually supportive and sympathetic professional networks, beneficial for museums as much as for 'source communities' as they navigate hierarchical language and other criteria that establish legitimacy thresholds.

Helen A. Robbins addresses similar topics in her discussion of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA, she argues, 'creates categories that require tribes and museums to fit objects into legal boxes and definitions that frequently are not culturally salient' (111). The consequences of this approach are made clear in the following essay by Maureen Matthews, which opens part three, 'Reflections on Returns'. In the case of a Pauingassi *mitigwakik* (drum), enforcing binary notions of sacred and secular through an arbitrary measure of 'authenticity' led to its 'wrongful repatriation' (121). Addressing restitution through a classificatory system that fails to acknowledge indigenous ways of knowing damages indigenous peoples' 'social agency to represent themselves in the world' (134). Moving beyond the dichotomies identified by Curtis, Robbins, and Matthews, Demelza van der Maas describes how skulls from Urk 'were considered active agents in the production of meaning and identity' (149), not merely post-hoc cultural remnants or bodies to be studied. Ultimately, this approach facilitated their return.

Museums have taken liberties not only with enforcing so-called objective knowledge frameworks, but also with the stewardship of collections. Ines Katzenhusen's contribution to the volume charts the fate of 70 works by Russian Constructivist artist Kazimir Malevich. While the artist's wish was to see his art in the hands of his family, Katzenhusen tracks their dispersal across three museum collections and their long-overdue return. While the repatriation of sacred items and human remains can be bogged down in legal and linguistic technicalities, some cases 'get far too easily out of sight when it comes to the demands of the international art market' (159) and the powers of prestige and money.

The final chapter is an open-ended question, sadly still unanswered. Kalliopi Fouseki's chapter is called 'Claiming the *Parthenon Marbles* Back: Whose Claim and on Behalf of Whom?' Fouseki illuminates an overlooked element of this long-time debate: what does the Greek public think? Fouseki identifies two camps of opinion: 'reunification and repatriation' (163). The reunification argument – returning the Marbles specifically to the Acropolis Hill – emphasizes the importance of repatriating the marbles by 'highlighting aesthetics, integrity, and [their] universal value' (163), thereby playing the British Museum's game. The repatriation claim, on the other hand, identifies the marbles' importance to the larger Greek *topos*, not as a symbol of Western society but of the Greek people. While the reunification argument resides comfortably in the sphere of academic, authorized heritage discourse, the repatriation argument comes from 'unofficial voices' (165) claiming cognitive ownership. Whether and how this case will be resolved remains to be seen.

It is the sense of an uncertain future that makes this volume relevant, nearly fifteen years after the original conference. Each author – with their unique experience and in their own voice – makes it clear that restitution is far more than the one-off return of stolen things. Communities and museums are ever-changing and their approach to material culture evolves. As new relationships between museums and communities are born, pre-existing ones require tending. What do the relationships between 'source communities' (an imperfect term, now called 'originating communities' by some) and the museums described in these chapters look like today? What growth and challenges have arisen between 2014 and 2024? What new

questions should we be asking? An addendum to this volume may provide valuable insight. Whether updated or not, this publication is an essential roadmap to revisit as we navigate the changing world of museums and restitution.

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