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Discipline(d) and Punish(ed):
The Museum as a ‘Prison’ of Culture

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Philosophy in the Department of Classics, Trinity College Dublin
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DECLARATION

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Signed: *Sophie McGrath*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines museum possession of objects against a framework of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, specifically his application of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon model. It applies the theory developed through Foucault's exploration of state institutions in his 1975 work to the dynamic that currently exists between the Museum, exhibits and visitors. Through Foucault's establishment of the symbiotic relationship that exists between Knowledge and Power, this thesis focuses on how knowledge (what is disclosed about the object; what is withheld), access (who gets to see it; where and when), and the visual (what is seen; what is not; and how it is seen/ exhibited) is controlled in a museum context. These issues are interrogated through the use of a series of specific case studies from the British Museum: the Benin Bronzes, the caryatid from the Erechtheion, and the Hoa Hakananai'a statue from Rapa Nui. These are all highly contested objects, embroiled in ongoing ownership and restitution debates. Similarly, they are all very culturally significant items, both to their places of origin (Nigeria, Greece and Easter Island, respectively) and to the British Museum's status as a 'World Museum'. Thus, this study examines the Museum as an institution that acts as a 'prison' of culture through an application of Foucauldian theory; looks at this in context in the form of the British Museum's possession of the Benin Bronzes, the caryatid, and Hoa Hakananai'a; and works towards solutions that will enable the 'freeing' of foreign cultures.

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By: Sophie McGurk (27th August 2019).

INTRODUCTION

“Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”¹
 ~ George Orwell

In his 1975 work, *Discipline and Punish*, French philosopher, historian and literary theorist, Michel Foucault asks of his readers:

Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?²

This is not the first time that these institutions, which on the surface may appear to vary greatly in function, have been considered together as part of one greater mechanism, one greater “laboratory of power”³: the Panopticon. It was in Jeremy Bentham’s 1787 work by the all-encompassing title:

Panopticon: or, the Inspection-House. Containing the Idea of a New Principle of Construction Applicable to any Sort of Establishment, in which Persons of any Description are to be Kept Under Inspection. And in Particular to Penitentiary-Houses, Prisons, Houses of Industry, Work-Houses, Poor-Houses, Manufactories, Mad-Houses, Hospitals, and Schools;

that this was first seen, and from which Foucault’s exploration is so heavily indebted. What these institutions and establishments have in common is how a simple refiguration of their architectural design can create a new structure for control, power, and knowledge – focusing more on an invisible discipline and punishment that creates constant visibility for its subjects. In this study, I propose that the museum, and more specifically the colonial museum, be added to this list.

In order to enact this argument, this thesis will examine museum possession of objects against a framework of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, specifically his adoption of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon model. Through an application of Foucault’s theory of state institutions, I will explore the dynamic that currently exists between the Museum, the exhibits

¹ Orwell, 2000: 40.

² Foucault, 2020: 228.

³ *ibid*: 205.

and the visitors. Foucault establishes a symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power, which will be introduced in Chapter 1. Further exploration of these ideas throughout the following three chapters will break down the three main elements of control in the museum context: knowledge (what is disclosed about an object; what is withheld); access (who gets to see it; where and when); and gaze (what is seen; what is not; how it is seen/ exhibited). In order to examine what I have designated as these three main pillars of a museum's control, I have selected a series of individual case studies all housed in the British Museum, the institution at the focus of this study. Whilst keeping in mind that, theoretically, the three pillars could apply to all three case-studies, each case-study will focus primarily on one.

The three case-studies are: the Benin Bronzes, the caryatid from the Erechtheion and the Hoa Hakananai'a statue. These are all highly contested objects, embroiled in ongoing ownership and restitution debates. Similarly, they are all very culturally significant items, both to their places of origin (Nigeria, Greece and Easter Island, respectively) and to the British Museum's status as a 'World Museum'. An analysis of the institution of the museum, what it claims to be and what it demands, is integral to this study. Elements of the history of the foundation of the museum as an institution will be explored in later chapters and will be relevant to a proper understanding of these dynamics and how they originated. Museums are known as places of "knowledge, mimesis, excitement, emotion and manners and above all perhaps, of civilisation."⁴ In this study, I propose that museums can also be considered 'heterotopic'⁵ spaces. From the Greek etymology 'hetero-' ('ἕτερος', 'other', 'another', 'different') and '-topos' ('τόπος', 'place'), this term can be understood to describe places that have more layers of meaning than immediately meets the eye. In other words, if a 'Utopia' is an idea or place that is not real but that represents a perfect society, a museum as a 'Heterotopia' does exactly the opposite. As museums have been described as "hidden 'colonial institutions' that neither incarcerate nor confine, yet nonetheless 'constrain and regularise behaviour' in favour of those in power,"⁶ the word 'hidden' is key in this assessment and in its heterotopic function.

The aim of this thesis is as laid out: to examine the Museum as an institution that acts as a 'prison' of culture through an application of Foucauldian theory; to look at this in the context of the British Museum's possession of the Benin Bronzes, the caryatid from the Erechtheion and Hoa Hakananai'a; and to work towards solutions that will enable the 'freeing'

⁴ Fyfe, 2016: 74.

⁵ Foucault, 1984: 3.

⁶ McAtackney and Palmer, 2016: 475.

of foreign cultures. This will only be possible through the use of a wide variety of sources and resources. The primary sources used mostly include literary criticism and theory, but I have also drawn from other primary materials in my research, such as newspaper articles and letters (in each case, both modern and contemporary pertaining to the British Museum's collection of the objects that form my case-studies). Secondary literature that I have consulted revolves around studies on museum possession, including ethics and legality; commentary on Foucauldian thought and theory; postcolonial and colonial studies; and the history and contest surrounding my case-studies.

In Chapter 1, I introduce the main points of discussion as theorised by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. I establish the relationship between Bentham's panoptic innovation and Foucault's exploration of state institutions, and determine how this can still be seen in practice today in the world around us. The study is also situated in the history of colonialism and discusses the dangers, affordances and misrepresentations of using the terms 'post-colonialism' in the context of the 'post-colonial' museum. This theoretical framework will set the scene for the following chapters which will respectively look at how the power of authority in the museum controls knowledge, gaze and access, in conjunction with my three chosen case studies.

The control of knowledge and how that has affected the display of Hoa Hakananai'a of Rapa Nui will be the focus of Chapter 2. Knowledge is controlled in a number of ways in museums, but the primary areas of focus in this chapter will be seen through the vehicles of museum labels and online catalogues. By examining these, I show how it is alternative histories and censored stories of acquisition that the museum makes available to the public. In this way, they fail to provide satisfactory forms of cultural translation which results in the visitor learning about indigenous objects through a very Western lens. This will be shown in practice through the case-study of Hoa Hakananai'a – its identity, acquisition, meaning and contest.

Chapter 3 will explore notions of access in the museum in conjunction with the display (and non-display) of the Benin Bronzes. This chapter will analyse how the behaviour of museum visitors is closely monitored and habitually constructed and how, as a result of the physical architecture, the way in which we move around time and space is highly restricted and curated. This chapter will examine the concept of 'outsiders' in the museum and discuss how from the time of its conception the museum has been a very socially charged space. The Benin Bronzes will be used as an example of how objects can be withheld from the public and how this creates a curatorial struggle between control and access.

Chapter 4's exploration of gaze in the museum demonstrates, in the case of the caryatid, how visibility can be a trap.⁷ The idea of gaze in the museum really brings into question ideas about the politics of exhibiting and illustrates that just because something is on public display does not mean it is being properly 'seen'. The way we see things can cause us to make misinformed and misleading assumptions which, one might argue, corrupts an object's biography. In the case of the single caryatid from the Erechtheion housed in the British Museum, one's gaze upon the display is highly politicised – the statue is seen alone, in a foreign country, and separated from its sculptural group.

In the Conclusion, I build on the discussions of Chapters 1-4, moving to consider ways in which we might begin to look to the future in terms of museum ownership of objects. It is vital that museums start to work towards actioning a return of knowledge that can “help societies to understand their own place in the world and come to terms with the past, especially when the past has been difficult.”⁸ Anne McClintock asks: “Can most of the world's countries be said ... to share a single 'common past', or a single 'common condition', called the 'post-colonial condition', or 'post-coloniality'?”⁹ In addition to the several things which my three case studies have in common – the major being the fact that they share anthropomorphic properties and significance, that they are all highly contested, that they are all originally part of larger groups, and that they are all housed in the British Museum – perhaps their most striking similarity (and the most significant one for the purposes of this study) is what McClintock has termed this 'post-coloniality'. The following chapters will explore how this condition presents itself in the museum context as a result of the control and conditions imposed by the power of the institution. Ultimately, this thesis will attempt to expose the institutional control and postcolonial habits that still infiltrate our society and remain, subsequently, accepted by it.

⁷ Foucault, 2020: 200.

⁸ Ovendon, 2020: 233

⁹ McClintock, 2020: 294.

CHAPTER 1

Setting (*and Surveilling*) the Scene

“You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every moment scrutinised.”¹
 ~ George Orwell.

The purpose of Michel Foucault’s 1975 work, *Discipline and Punish*, specifically his adoption of Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticism*, is to explore how the inducement in the mind of the subjugated (the ‘inmate’) of “a state of consciousness and permanent visibility assures the automatic functioning of power.”² Foucault recognised that Bentham’s Panopticon was “never intended to be solely an architectural blueprint for a prison but was, from the outset, a plan for all types of governmental institutions;”³ and in this analysis, he pushes the boundaries beyond Bentham’s eponymous list of appropriate institutions to “encompass all systematic, calculating forms of observation.”⁴ This study will focus on this term ‘observation’ and how it speaks particularly to museum practices, its control over exhibiting, and its purpose to the public. Museums are controlled forms of space: for the exhibits, the curators and the visitors. The way in which we interact with exhibits, the order in which we see things and how we are allowed to move around the space is all carefully curated. Thus, the Museum as a prison is not merely a building, “it is a field of multiple forces: organising space, controlling actions and bodies, watching and analysing its population.”⁵ In short, our knowledge is controlled, our gaze and our access is controlled. It is, as Bentham said, much more than architectural ingenuity, it is an event of the human mind.⁶

Michel Foucault (1926-84)⁷ was one of the most influential and provocative thinkers of the 20th century. A Professor at the Collège de France in Paris,⁸ his work spanned across many disciplines and was equally impactful in each separate field. These included: literary criticism; history; philosophy; sociology; and psycho-analysis. Foucault is also recognised to

¹ Orwell, 2000: 5.

² Foucault, 2020: 201.

³ Johnson, 2014: 8.

⁴ Power, 2011: 39.

⁵ Johnson, 2014: 6.

⁶ Foucault, 2020: 216.

⁷ Sheridan, 2020: i.

⁸ *ibid*: i.

have contributed to the basis of a number of major literary movements including Structuralism, Linguistics, Narratology and Historicism.⁹ The *Archaeology of Knowledge*,¹⁰ published in 1969, revolves around Foucault's definition and re-evaluation of 'discourse'. Befitting the Structuralist movement, Foucault understood discourse to be in keeping with an implied linguistic order and as a set of ways of thinking and practicing language to apply to one certain area.¹¹ This systematic use of discourse is apparent throughout the rest of his works as will be seen in *Discipline and Punish*, the most prolific example of his impact in the tradition of Historicism. His three-volume work, the *History of Sexuality*,¹² was also ground-breaking in the field of gender studies and remains relevant as a text which should be both consulted and challenged in our current efforts towards a greater appreciation, awareness and integration of queer and gender theory. Foucault's contribution to this field is especially pertinent due to his own homosexuality and the nature of his death – it having occurred as a result of complications after he contracted HIV, which led to an instance of septicaemia in his brain.¹³

Discipline and Punish can be divided into four main parts: 'Torture', 'Punishment', 'Discipline' and 'Prison'. 'Torture' begins with Foucault situating 'the body' in the history of crime and punishment. He charts the development of new forms of discipline that move away from explicitly corporal and public forms of punishment (i.e. away from punishment as a 'spectacle') to more representative and signifying ones.¹⁴ This chapter is also where Foucault introduces his theory behind "power-knowledge relations"¹⁵ that is integral to the basis of his study. Foucault explains that "power and knowledge directly imply one another"¹⁶ and that "power produces knowledge."¹⁷ In other words, one cannot exist without the other. Leading on from this foundation of power, knowledge and new modes of 'torture', Foucault then discusses how this manifests into the history and theory behind punishment. What begins to be maximised at this point is the "representation of the penalty, not its corporal reality."¹⁸ Whilst the 'body' remains an integral and inseparable part of the "micro-physics of power,"¹⁹ it is only

⁹ See the works of Saussure (1916), Propp (1928) and Barthes (1957) for examples of major Structuralist works that would have contributed to the basis of Foucault's engagement with Structuralism and his 1969 work, the *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

¹⁰ Foucault, 2002.

¹¹ See Rivkin and Ryan, 2004, pp. 53-55.

¹² Foucault, 1990.

¹³ Lang, 1997: 242.

¹⁴ See Foucault, 2002, for his interaction with the Structuralist movement.

¹⁵ Foucault, 2020: 27.

¹⁶ *ibid*: 27.

¹⁷ *ibid*: 27.

¹⁸ *ibid*: 95.

¹⁹ *ibid*: 26.

considered useful when it is both a “productive body and a subjected body.”²⁰ Thus, the effect on the body flips so that it no longer manifests physically but mentally.²¹ In both cases, an audience is an important part of punishment as it acts as a driver for social cohesion and dissuades others from the same act. In this way, Foucault’s idea of power develops so that it can be defined as an imbalanced relationship wherein one person has affect over another’s actions and movements in time and space.

This idea is further elucidated in his third part, ‘Discipline’, and forms the basis for what we know to be the modern ‘prison’. It is here that Foucault directly engages with Bentham’s Panopticon (*Fig. 1.1*).

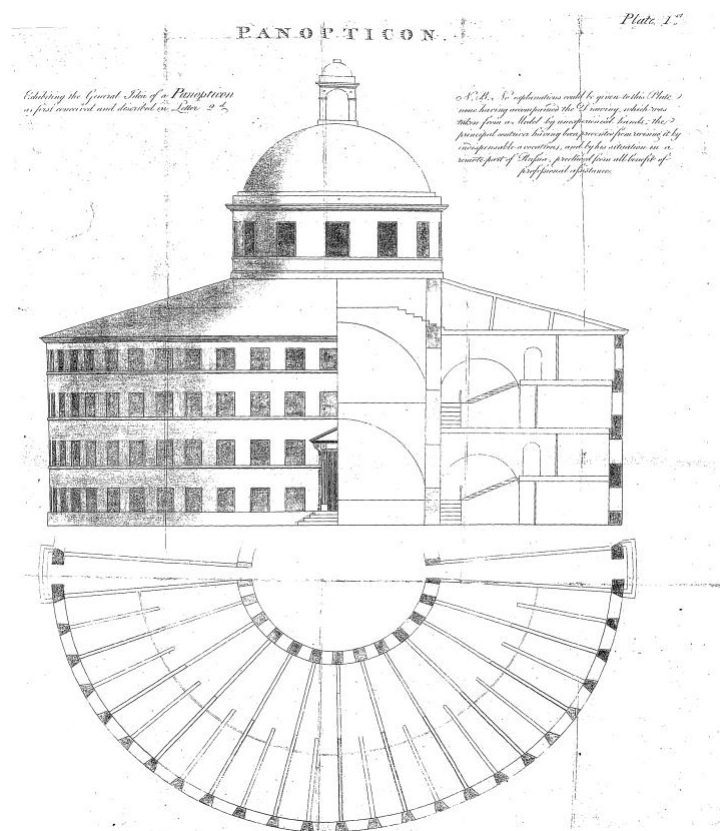


Fig. 1.1. The general plan for the ‘Panopticon’. The building is circular: the prisoners’ cells occupy the circumference, the inspector’s tower occupies the centre. Each cell is partitioned from the next and has a window facing the tower. Light is allowed in to provide the inspector with full view; but the prisoners’ view out is obscured by an iron grating.

The combination of hierarchal observation (made possible by this architectural ingenuity), the control of activity and the monopoly on knowledge creates a “modest, suspicious power, which

²⁰ *ibid*: 26.

²¹ Rosen and Santesso, 2010: 1041.

functions as a calculated, but permanent economy.”²² The superiority of the Panopticon model and the effect it had on the history of discipline and punishment is wholly recognised and acknowledged by Foucault. In his own words: “The Panopticon is a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put to it, produces homogenous effects of power.”²³ The final part of *Discipline and Punish* sees Foucault sum up how the developments and innovations of the prison have infiltrated our wider society, resulting in it becoming one “carceral system.”²⁴ The prison is just one of many institutions (the school, the factory, the hospital, etc.) that are completely integrated and ingrained into our everyday lives. In true Orwellian fashion, Foucault concludes that our society is one of surveillance; and as this surveillance is constantly changing and evolving into something more sophisticated, it is ultimately rendered unavoidable.

Jeremy Bentham was an English philosopher and widely regarded as one of the founders of Utilitarianism.²⁵ In our world of accepted and unchallenged CCTV, Bentham can be considered as the original father of surveillance. He published his work, *Panopticon: or, the Inspection House*, in 1787 and since then it has acted as a blueprint, both metaphorically and literally, for the modern prison. The East wing of Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin, built in 1864, is one example of a ‘panoptic’ prison.²⁶ The word ‘Panopticon’ comes from the Greek word πανοπτικός (panoptikos; ‘πᾶν-’ meaning ‘all’ and ‘-οπτικός’ meaning ‘seeing’). As will be discussed, the architectural intention of the Panopticon is exactly that: to be all seeing (*Fig. 1.1*). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault provides a breakdown of the explicit use of the Panopticon as a prison:

“All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker, or a schoolboy”²⁷ (*Fig. 1.1*).

He describes the cells as being like “so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible.”²⁸ However, this “visibility is a trap,”²⁹ for the observation does not go both ways. The inmate can never know if he is currently

²² Foucault, 2020: 170.

²³ *ibid*: 202.

²⁴ *ibid*: 293.

²⁵ McMullen, 2015.

²⁶ ‘The Bentham Project, UCL.

²⁷ Foucault, 2020: 200.

²⁸ *ibid*: 200.

²⁹ *ibid*: 200.

being watched and thus, must constantly act as if he were. Bentham also states the sociological and psychological effects that the Panopticon can have which extend beyond simple observance and the assurance of good behaviour. To him, the Panopticon will ensure:

Morals reformed – health preserved – industry invigorated – instruction diffused – problem burthens lightened – economy seated, as it were, upon a rock – the Gordian knot of the Poor-Laws not cut but untied – all by a simple idea in Architecture!³⁰

Bentham proposed that the Panopticon could be used “no matter how different, or even opposite the purpose.”³¹ In short, he believed that “it will be found applicable, I think, without exception to all establishments whatsoever.”³² Whereas Foucault was certain the Panopticon created an “omnipresent and omniscient power,”³³ Bentham seemed to think more sentimentally about it,³⁴ causing him, in later years, to begin to view his panoptic model as a failure³⁵ – not because he found any weakness in his own idea, but due to the nature of people who found themselves to be in positions of power. He wished for the Panopticon to offer full transparency – not just for observation of the inmates and their behaviour but, similarly, as a measure to avoid any abuses of power by those in charge. This is one feature of the Panopticon model that human nature rejected and which led Bentham to adopt a type of anti-panoptic view later on in life. Nevertheless, his final resting place is quite contradictory to this apparent change in philosophy. His body and head can be found on public display in University College London and his cadaver contains a webcam (‘the PanoptiCAM’) that records and broadcasts the movements of its spectators online.³⁶ It seems his legacy remains: surveillance.

The Panopticon’s “unverifiable nature”³⁷ is the root of its power and control. The main effect being succinctly summed up by Foucault: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.” Through an analysis of this effect, this thesis will explore whether certain diasporic objects can ever have a voice of their own in a museum context or, will their role always remains as ‘never a subject in communication’? As discussed, Foucault finds the difference between old and new forms of power to be the

³⁰ Bentham, 1787: iii.

³¹ *ibid*: 2.

³² *ibid*: 2.

³³ Rosen and Santesso, 2010: 1055.

³⁴ *ibid*: 1055.

³⁵ McMullen, 2015.

³⁶ *ibid*.

³⁷ Hillier and Hillier, 2012: 54.

transformation of “oppressive, visible and violent external exercises of power into its exact opposite: passive, invisible and psychological effects of power.”³⁸ In an application of this to the post-colonial museum context, this difference in power is the difference between old colonial violence and current colonial ownership of culture – instead of enacting physical violence on the subjugated countries, they continue to have psychological power over them by imprisoning/ controlling their culture.

The work of Foucault offers a robust framework for analysing a series of important questions about museums and their possession of material. Firstly, it is important to consider how we can begin to define museum authority. There are two ways of understanding the word ‘authority’ in a museum context: it is an authority which, of course, comes from their expert knowledge.³⁹ But, similarly, an authority in closer keeping with the autocratic meaning of the word, one that is very much about control. The exploration of authority creates further difficulties when it comes to then classifying a museum’s actual purpose. Is it there to educate or entertain? Can it do both at the same time?⁴⁰ In this particular context, the purposes of education and entertainment can easily find themselves at odds with each other because the contest and the reality of the cultural loss surrounding these objects, and the history behind their acquisition, is not what one expects to find when looking for entertainment or release. Hence, it is interesting to recognise how museums use their authority to balance exhibitions so that they are, simultaneously, entertaining and educating their visitors. Unfortunately, the answer to this is often omission.

These questions cannot even be considered except against a backdrop of colonialism. The colonial is not a moment in time that has passed; and the museum is actually a form of ongoing colonial violence.⁴¹ The term ‘post-colonialism’ can be problematic as the prefix ‘post-’ allows us to feel as if colonialism is simply an era of the past. Instead, the term should not be understood as everything that has happened since colonialism ‘ended’, but rather everything that has happened from the very beginning of colonialism.⁴² This includes the colonial afterlives and “imperial debris”⁴³ that can be still physically located in our landscape today – the museum, the zoo, the botanical garden. Therefore, although colonialism may have appeared to end, the term ‘post-colonialism’ is actually “prematurely celebratory.”⁴⁴ We are

³⁸ *ibid*: 55.

³⁹ Wetturland, 2012: 89,

⁴⁰ Appadurai, 2020: 46.

⁴¹ Modest, 2020: 67.

⁴² McClintock, 2013: 293.

⁴³ McAtackney and Palmer, 2016: 472.

⁴⁴ McClintock, 2013: 298.

still perpetuating colonial practices and will continue to do so, so long as the museum has unopposed authority over these objects and the sole power to re-write their biographies. An ‘object biography’ encompasses the object’s entire history, whether it be comfortable or not, and can be understood as “the way objects become invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in.”⁴⁵ As colonialism is very often the social interaction that museum objects find themselves ‘caught up in’, colonisation can be understood as a vital process that leads to the alienation of objects and the corruption of their biographies. Colonisation forces a change in role and dynamic that produces positions of “domination and submission which turn the colonising man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.”⁴⁶ An understanding of this relationship between coloniser and the colonised accounts for the reason why Aimé Césaire suggested colonisation instead be referred to as *chosification* (‘thingification’).⁴⁷

Language also plays a large part in the museum’s role as an “operative of colonialism.”⁴⁸ It is, after all, “a carrier of culture.”⁴⁹ English was the “official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom”⁵⁰ and remains the primary language through which these objects are displayed. Museums all around the world invest heavily in translated guidebooks and audio guides. Yet, the primacy of English remains across all international museums – for example, if a second language is chosen for museum labels, it is likely to be in English. This may be deeply rooted in colonialism, but is also highly pragmatic in the international sphere. Hence, as Thiong’o declared: “the bullet was the means of physical subjugation, language was the means of spiritual subjugation.”⁵¹ And it still is. This comment from Thiong’o on the colonial experience, refers back to Foucault’s recognition of the old ways of power transforming into the new, and how closely interconnected power is with knowledge. Although this new form of colonial violence may not appear as obvious as physical violence, culturally, it is just as visceral:

⁴⁵ Gosden and Marshall, 1999: 170.

⁴⁶ Césaire, 2013: 177.

⁴⁷ *ibid*: 177.

⁴⁸ McAtackney and Palmer, 2016: 471.

⁴⁹ Thiong’o, 2013: 439.

⁵⁰ *ibid*: 439.

⁵¹ *ibid*: 437.

“But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard and the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom.”⁵²

Through an application of a combination of this literary and colonial theory, I will examine the institution of the British Museum, as a whole and in its ownership of my three case-studies. Every day, *Panopticism* becomes more relevant in our contemporary society. We are continuously tracked and listened to through our technology; we are sent targeted ads accordingly. This is no secret – we choose to accept the terms and conditions; we agree to the ‘cookies’. However, this supposed transparency and consent is also a trap, as we cannot use the service without giving up these rights – and in an increasingly digital world, there is no real choice but to ‘keep up with the times’. It is this type of ‘apparent transparency’ that was so disappointing to Bentham; and is exactly what can be found today behind the scenes in the running of institutions, especially museums. Information is withheld from us, or given to us selectively or even incorrectly. Objects are withheld from both the countries of origin and the visitor. The exhibits are under full control of the Museum and the visitors’ interactions with them are similarly watched and controlled. It may not be possible to ever fully break the panopticon of control that these institutions have, nonetheless, perhaps a greater call for full transparency, instead of just a curated form of it, would help to begin to acknowledge the pain and frustration that so many cultures have felt as a result of having their histories removed and retold. It is the control over knowledge, as seen through the British Museum’s possession of Hoa Hakananai’a from Rapa Nui, that I will explore in the next chapter.

⁵² *ibid*: 436.

CHAPTER 2

Knowledge and Hoa Hakananai'a

*"The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth."*¹
 ~ George Orwell.

The control of knowledge is the outcome that is most in keeping with the legacy of the Panopticon and the sociological effect of surveillance. This chapter will focus on the history of the museum's monopoly on knowledge and, through an application of this to the British Museum's ownership and display of a megalithic statue known as Hoa Hakananai'a (*Fig. 2.1*) from Rapa Nui,² how this is put into practice. The ongoing control of knowledge within the institution proves that "colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country ... It turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it."³ Rapa Nui is considered the most remote inhabited island in the Pacific and was one of the last places in the world to be permanently settled. However, as colonialism wrapped itself around the globe it managed to reach even this most remote location and Hoa Hakananai'a symbolises how the course of Rapa Nui history was "interrupted and redirected by the impact of Europeans."⁴ Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate why, in a world of 'factoids',⁵ 'fake news' and 'alternative facts',⁶ now is the time to begin to interrogate and reject false histories and provenances.

The danger of misinformation is that it "not only creates but also maintains."⁷ Winston Churchill's old adage, *history is written by the victors*, is only true because history cannot be written without an access to knowledge, and it is the 'victors' who are the keepers of that knowledge. Through this 'victory', the museum takes on the role of a 'prison' in the sense that it is an "exemplary organizational location for a double sense of discipline in Foucault's sense

¹ Orwell, 2000: 86.

² The native name for 'Easter Island'.

³ Fanon, 2013: 37.

⁴ Van Tilburg, 1995: 43.

⁵ The term 'factoid' was coined in 1973 by Norman Mailer to mean a piece of information that is repeated so often it is assumed to be true. *See Dickson, 2014.*

⁶ These terms began to be popularised in January 2017: 'alternative facts' being first used by Kellyanne Conway, the US Counsellor to Trump, in regard to claims about the number of people who attended the inauguration of President Trump; and 'fake news' was a claim directed at CNN in a press conference by, then President, Donald Trump.

⁷ Said, 2003: 12.

– both as constraint over the individual and as an individuating positive body of knowledge.”⁸ However, this power is dually exercised and before it is impressed upon the visitor, it is acted upon the objects. Hillier and Hillier have explored this method when examining prisons in conjunctions with centres of education: “in prison and education, power is impressed on the bodies of subjects to produce a particular type of subject and to produce knowledge about those subjects.”⁹ Power is used first to classify the object to meet the body of authority’s mission and then is used secondarily when in communication with the visitor. “Meaning resides in the slippage of language,”¹⁰ and often what is not being said reveals more than what is.

From the time of its conception the museum has functioned in the same capacity as Foucault’s prison – as an “apparatus of knowledge.”¹¹ The museum rose to power in society in the Victorian era¹² but institutions like the British Museum, founded in 1753, were born from the time of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, both a period and a process, dominated the intellectual and philosophical world between the 17th and 18th centuries. It was also during this period that many of the objects now found in museum collections were being acquired. According to Immanuel Kant, “Enlightenment is the release from a self-incurred immaturity,”¹³ and while, historically, many view the Enlightenment as a time of freedom, it was a type of freedom that was only available to the elite. It was a time in which colonialism had not yet obtained its ‘post-’ prefix and prerogative social inventions like the ‘Grand Tour’ were seen as a rite of passage.¹⁴ It was also during this time that Bentham was creating and designing his new panoptic model – the very antithesis of freedom. Foucault notes this oxymoron: “The Enlightenment, which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines.”¹⁵ This paradox accounts for many problems in our understanding of colonialism and resulting power relations because “our basic concepts of personhood, property, power and identity”¹⁶ were all conceived during the time of the Enlightenment and subsequent colonial encounters. The irony of this has not only been recognised in hindsight but was criticised contemporarily. The governing ideas and values of the Enlightenment period were of

⁸ Power, 2011: 39.

⁹ Hillier and Hillier, 2012: 52.

¹⁰ Mishra and Hodge, 2013: 286.

¹¹ Foucault, 2020: 126.

¹² Geismar, 2018: 2.

¹³ Kant, 1970: 54.

¹⁴ See the published journal of C. R. Cockerell (1903) documenting his travels around Europe during the years 1810-1817 for a comprehensive account of a ‘Grand Tour’ experience of an elite, young man.

¹⁵ Foucault, 2020: 222.

¹⁶ Gosden, 2004: 20.

knowledge, learning, discovery and curiosity.¹⁷ However, Romantic writers including Lord Byron and Thomas Hardy were extremely critical of the hypocrisy and privilege of promoting understanding and appreciation across cultures only when these cultures were, as described in Hardy's 1927 poem, *Christmas in the Elgin Room*, "brought to the gloom of this gaunt room."¹⁸

Alongside functioning as 'apparatuses of knowledge', museums also construct themselves as "powerful sites of cultural and cross-cultural interpretation."¹⁹ Objects such as Hoa Hakananai'a embody the idea of "cultures of contact."²⁰ Museums have the authority to misrepresent the dynamics that exist due to this contact and as a result, the carefully curated knowledge being given to us ensures that "rarely does an exhibition project ... link coloniser and colonised."²¹ Power also comes from "the vast amount of documentation kept on their subjects."²² Museums have extensive archives on their collections, but these are rarely found in the guise of an open access library and instead are for the use of the curators and researchers in the institution. As Derrida noted: "There is no political power without control over the archive."²³ Thus, the museum has the power to restrict and manipulate knowledge, which can have serious consequences as "cultural and political identity can be seriously undermined when communities do not have access to their own history."²⁴ As is the case with Hoa Hakananai'a, the museum's power comes from their ability to share alternative histories about an object and to restrict access to a further understanding of the object.

Commodore Richard Powell arrived on Rapa Nui onboard the HMS *Topaze* in November 1868, 20 years before the annexation of the island by Chile.²⁵ At that time, Hoa Hakananai'a (literally meaning *stolen, lost or hidden friend*)²⁶ (Fig. 2.1) was standing upright but partially buried in an elliptical stone building called *taura renga* at the ceremonial village of Orongo at the south-western tip of the island.²⁷ This detail alone sets Hoa Hakananai'a apart from the other 1000 *Moai*²⁸ that still remain on the island. The *Moai* statues were believed to house the spirits of prominent ancestors and were worshipped, protected and celebrated in their role as protectors. About Hoa Hakananai'a, Carlos Edmunds, the president of the Council of

¹⁷ Appadurai, 2020: 45.

¹⁸ Hardy, 1927.

¹⁹ Sculthorpe, 2017: 81.

²⁰ Pollard *et al.*, 2010: 576.

²¹ Sculthorpe, 2017: 79.

²² Hillier and Hillier, 2012: 59.

²³ Derrida, 1998: 4.

²⁴ Ovenden, 2020: 181.

²⁵ Barlett, 2019.

²⁶ Van Tilburg, 2006: 36.

²⁷ Van Tilburg, 2014: 383.

²⁸ The Rapanui name for these large, anthropomorphic stone statues.

Elders of Rapa Nui has explained, “He stood [at Orongo] to watch over and protect all of the tribes, and he helped forge friendships between them.”²⁹ These *Moai* statues are found in three locations: in and around Rano Raraku, a volcanic crater; scattered in isolation inland; and arranged together in groups on *ahu* (long, stone platforms) that are found in coastal areas, positioned so that the statues’ backs are to the shore.³⁰ Its location is not the only detail that marks Hoa Hakananai'a as special. In terms of style, it is of the typical design seen across the island. Its features – including its prominent brow, square-cut face, protruding chin, long, rectangular ears, pursed lips and accentuated nipples – are consistent with those found dispersed around the island.³¹ In the museum context, Hoa Hakananai'a is an imposing figure, standing at 2.42 metres on top of a plinth with a width of 96 centimetres (*Fig. 2.1*).³²



Fig. 2.1. Hoa Hakananai'a from Rapa Nui, currently on display in the British Museum in Room 24 as part of the 'Living and Dying' Exhibition.

Back on Rapa Nui, Hoa Hakananai'a would be considered small, other *Moai* found on the island are considerably larger, ranging from 3.5 to 6 metres tall.³³ However, its material is distinctive from the others – it being one of only 15 statues carved from flow lava, not volcanic tuff.³⁴ The

²⁹ Barlett, 2019.

³⁰ Pitts *et al.*, 2014: 294.

³¹ *ibid*: 296.

³² 'Hoa Hakananai'a', *The British Museum*.

³³ Pitts *et al.*, 2014: 296.

³⁴ *ibid*: 296.

statue's most idiosyncratic detail is the bas-relief carving across its back. These unusual petroglyphs were added a number of years after the statue's creation and this,³⁵ combined with its unusual location, signifies the special importance of Hoa Hakananai'a in the community and the reasoning behind its selection as an active participant in the Birdman religion adopted by the Rapanui people.

Hoa Hakananai'a was clearly chosen from the other existing *Moai* as being distinct enough to carry out this apparent change in function. As discussed, the Polynesian inhabitants worshiped their natural and ancestral gods. However, their arrival and use of the island over many years saw natural resources becoming more and more scarce. The inhabitants hunted the island's native species of bird to the point of almost extinction, forcing the entire bird population to migrate to a rocky outcrop off the shore. For the people of Rapa Nui in these now desperate times, "it must have seemed as if the favour of the gods was being withdrawn."³⁶ The inhabitants had no choice but to invent a new religious practice and series of rituals that, unsurprisingly, became all about scarce resources. This is how the Birdman (*tangata manu*) religion was formed and Hoa Hakananai'a remained the one constant that transcended the old and the new traditions. Archaeological and ritual evidence show that the Birdman cult was still in practice on the island in the 19th century, possibly up until a year before Hoa Hakananai'a was taken from the island.³⁷ This is also supported by the fact that the population's conversion to Christianity only took place in 1868, the same year that Powell and the HMS *Topaze* arrived on the island.³⁸ Thus, Hoa Hakananai'a was not an abandoned, ancient relic when colonialism arrived to the island, but a relevant and respected pillar of the community and, to this day, remains an active agent in community history and ritual. This is clearly reflected in the words of the Rapa Nui Governor, Tarita Alarcon Rapu, spoken when he visited his "ancestor"³⁹ in the British Museum in 2018: "We are just a body. You, the British people, have our soul."⁴⁰

The current contest over Hoa Hakananai'a is ongoing and unresolved. The objects may have been collected during a liminal time in Rapanui history when "social bonds were tenuous, status was altered, order was dictated by a colonial presence and the continuity of tradition was uncertain."⁴¹ Nonetheless, Hoa Hakananai'a no longer exists in the museum under these same

³⁵ These carvings can be found on the back of the statue, ranging between its girdle and the top of its head. They consist of two facing 'birdmen' (*tangata manu*). Above their beaks, a bird identified as a sooty tern (*manutara*) is flanked by ceremonial wooden panels ('*ao* or '*rapa*') and vulva symbols (*komari*). In Pitts *et al.*, 2014: 301.

³⁶ Macgregor, 386

³⁷ Pitts *et al.*, 2014: 319.

³⁸ Pollard *et al.*, 2010: 562.

³⁹ Tarita Alarcon Rapu, 2018. In ABC News, 2018.

⁴⁰ ABC News, 2018.

⁴¹ Van Tilburg, 2014: 392.

terms and despite countless attempts at negotiation on the part of the highest level of Rapa Nui and Chilean government, Hoa Hakananai'a's presence in the British Museum denotes it as private property.⁴² It stands in the museum to be seen, even though its original purpose was the exact opposite – to see and protect. Similar to what will be seen with the caryatid in Chapter 4, the anthropomorphic nature of Hoa Hakananai'a imbues it with a particularly special meaning for the Rapanui people. As Carlos Edmunds said, “This is no rock ... It embodies the spirit of an ancestor, almost like a grandfather, this is what we want returned to our island.”⁴³ Offers in relation to its return have been made, not just by the Rapa Nui government, but by independent indigenous members of the community too. Rapa Nui sculptor, Benedicto Tuki made an offer to Chile's Ministry of National Assets to carve an exact replica of Hoa Hakananai'a to replace the statue in the British Museum on the original's return.⁴⁴ However, the British Museum seem uninterested in offers such as this. About many contested objects, the British Museum responds to pleas for repatriation by explaining that by inhabiting a ‘universal museum’, the objects have taken on an ‘ambassadorial role’ – representing their country of origin and helping to educate the world on foreign cultures, thus, enriching it. One of the major issues of debate in this contest is the fact that, to visitors of the British Museum, the biography of Hoa Hakananai'a is not properly available. In essence, due to their control over our knowledge of the object, it is being misrepresented. This is done in two major ways, through the museum's labelling and the museum's online catalogue.

After the HMS *Topaze* returned to England following the expedition, Hoa Hakananai'a was gifted to Queen Victoria who then decided to donate it in the British Museum:

My Lords having offered the statue to Her Majesty the Queen have received an information of Her Majesty's desire that it should be presented to the British Museum.⁴⁵

As this is how the statue directly came to be in the Museum's possession, this is the only part of the acquisition that is openly advertised. The museum label on the statue, in fact, states that this object was primarily a donation to the museum from Queen Victoria (*Fig. 2.2*).

⁴² Johnston, 2018.

⁴³ Barlett, 2019.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *From* a letter, dated 25th August 1869, from Vernon Lushington at the Admiralty to John winter Jones, the Museum's Principal Librarian. *In* Van Tilburg, 2006: 3.

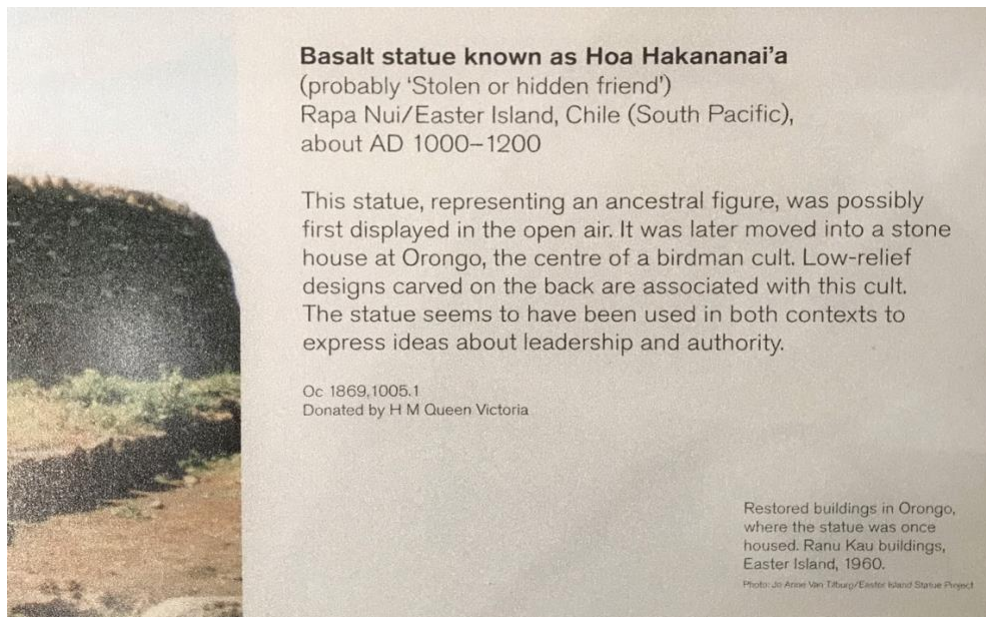


Fig. 2.2. The museum label for Hoa Hakananai'a in the British Museum.

It says nothing about the steps that led to its removal from the island, nor its journey back to Britain on HMS *Topaze*. The label is the major way in which the museum can communicate knowledge to us about an object and nowadays, most museum visitors do not possess expert knowledge about the objects they are viewing.⁴⁶ Thus, the label is one of the main ways that the casual visitor will come to understand the object and if the label is heavy in omission, the truth behind these objects will remain unknown and unimportant in popular memory. By not interrogating this information and simply accepting them as facts, the museum visitor's mind becomes the same as that of a panoptic prisoner, as a "surface of inscription for power."⁴⁷

Another instrument of knowledge with which the museum can educate the visitor is their online catalogue. Especially since the beginning of the Covid pandemic in 2020 and the resulting closure of public spaces, society has begun to rely more and more on the online resources of public institutions. The British Museum's online catalogue is a wonderful, extensive resource in which the Museum's collection can be found digitised. Details of Hoa Hakananai'a can be found under the 'Contested Objects from the Collection' section of the British Museum's website, but the catalogue entry gives a story much more akin to the one included in Neil MacGregor's BBC Radio 4 podcast and book, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, that will be discussed later. Whilst "the Museum recognises the significance of Hoa

⁴⁶ Breitwieser, 2013: 5.

⁴⁷ Rosen and Santesso, 2010: 1041.

Hakananai'a and Moai Hava for the Rapanui community today and acknowledges the impact of their removal from the island in 1868,⁴⁸ their position remains clear:

The strength of the British Museum's collection is its breadth and depth which allows millions of visitors an understanding of the cultures of the world and how they interconnect – whether through trade, migration, conquest, peaceful exchange or other interactions – both in the past and today.⁴⁹

Hoa Hakananai'a is clearly a valued part of the British Museum's collection and through its ongoing possession of it, the British Museum live up to one of the museum's "central missions"⁵⁰: "to select objects and ascribe cultural (and indeed ultimately economic) value to them."⁵¹ Hoa Hakananai'a was even chosen to be part of a set of six commemorative Royal Mail postage stamps in 2003 marking the British Museum's 250th anniversary (Fig. 2.3).⁵² In the supplementary blurbs for each object included as part of the presentation pack, history and context are selectively communicated.⁵³ Perhaps this is due to the celebratory nature of the stamps, or it is a matter of careful editing – either way, anything difficult in relation to the objects was avoided.



Fig. 2.3. A set of six commemorative stamps to celebrate the British Museum's 250th Anniversary.

The Trustees of the British Museum's position on Hoa Hakananai'a is mirrored by Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum. MacGregor chose Hoa Hakananai'a to be

⁴⁸ See 'Moai', *The British Museum*.

The Moai Hava is another Rapa Nui statue, taken by the HMS Topaze at the same as Hoa Hakananai'a. It is a smaller less significant *Moai* and it remains in the possession of the British Museum but is not currently on display.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Breitwieser, 2013: 30.

⁵¹ *ibid.*: 30.

⁵² Van Tilburg, 2006: 5.

⁵³ 'British Museum, 2003', *Collect GB Stamps*.

included in his radio series and book as one of the 100 object that changed the world.⁵⁴ However, the narrative of the statue's acquisition by the officers of the HMS Topaze which he chose to include differs from most scholarly accounts. He states that, having been recently baptised, the chiefs of the island presented the statue to the officers of the Topaze. He follows on to speculate the reasoning behind this:

We don't know why they wanted him [Hoa Hakananai'a] to leave the island, but perhaps the old ancestral sculpture was seen as a threat to the new Christian faith.⁵⁵

However, most other sources I have dealt with tell a story with much less indigenous agency. Instead, they see Powell, "impressed with the number of archaeological remains and apparently seeking a bigger and more impressive 'souvenir' than Moai Hava,"⁵⁶ which had already been collected, sending out exploratory parties. As previously mentioned, we know from the archaeological and ritual evidence that Hoa Hakananai'a was still in use up to a year before the arrival of the British expedition, so it is interesting to note that MacGregor, now and in his former role as Director of the British Museum, believed and supported this opposing version of events.

The literal translation and meaning of 'Hoa Hakananai'a' is also an instance in which Neil MacGregor disagrees with experts of Rapa Nui archaeology and history. 'Hoa Hakananai'a' literally means 'stolen friend'.⁵⁷ The origin of the name is unknown, but many have wondered whether it was in reference to its unusual location – it being removed from its group and restationed at Orongo. As well as 'stolen', it could also be understood to mean 'hidden' or 'lost', which would also speak to its location. However, Tilburg does not disregard that the reference to 'stolen' "could also be directed at the crew of the Topaze, which removed the statue from its island home."⁵⁸ MacGregor, on the other hand, does not even mention the word 'stolen' as part of the translation but instead states that it can be understood just to mean 'hidden'. MacGregor ends his chapter on Hoa Hakananai'a with a sad image that remains the object's reality: "He faces south-east, looking towards Rapa Nui, 14,000 kilometres (8,500 miles) away."⁵⁹ This image of Hoa Hakananai'a isolated from its statue group is mirrored by

⁵⁴ MacGregor, 2012: 383-387.

⁵⁵ *ibid*: 387.

⁵⁶ Van Tilburg, 2006: 33.

⁵⁷ *ibid*: 36.

⁵⁸ *ibid*: 36.

⁵⁹ MacGregor, 2012: 387.

the caryatid. It is also an image portrayed by Robert Frost in his poem, *The Bad Island – Easter*, from his 1962 collection, *In the Clearing*:

That primitive head,
So ambitiously vast,
Yet so rude in its art,
Is as easily read
For the woes of the past
As a clinical chart.
For one thing alone,
The success of the lip
So scornfully curled
Has that tonnage of stone
Been brought in a ship
Halfway round the world.⁶⁰

No matter which version of the story we are being told, these poignant images transcend that knowledge and illustrate the reality of Hoa Hakananai'a – stranded on the opposite side of the world, far removed from its original context, role, and people.

The deliberate destruction of knowledge was a “routine aspect of colonialism and empire.”⁶¹ This is exemplified by Hoa Hakananai'a, but also applies to the other case studies that will be discussed later (the Benin Bronzes and the caryatid from the Erechtheion). In the same way as with Hoa Hakananai'a, the knowledge available for the Benin Bronzes on the online catalogue tells a different story of acquisition to that found throughout academia and shows the museum's carefully chosen and projected positions on certain matters. The Benin Bronzes and their acquisition will be discussed in detail in the next chapter but, for example, if you select one of the items from the catalogue of objects from Benin, under the title of 'Excavator/ Field Collector' you will find: Captain Herbert Sutherland Walker.⁶² Captain Walker was one of the leaders of the British so-called 'punitive' expedition to Benin. He is similarly stated as the 'Previous Owner' of the object, not the *Oba* (King) of Benin.⁶³ The caryatid, discussed in Chapter 4, is in a similar position to Hoa Hakananai'a with regard to museum labelling. There is not much detailed or nuanced information to be found about Lord

⁶⁰ Frost, 1962: p. 66.

⁶¹ Ovenden, 2002: 232.

⁶² See 'Benin Bronzes', *The British Museum*.

⁶³ *ibid.*

Elgin and his acquisition of the Marbles between 1801 and 1802. Strikingly, the caryatid is not to be found beside the other Parthenon Marbles in the Duveen Gallery and, thus, further alienated from that context and from the information given about the Marbles. In terms of the Marbles themselves, there is little information to be found beside the actual objects. Instead, visitors have to choose to enter a small anteroom in which there is more information on display.

The deliberate destruction and colonial censorship of knowledge is a theme and reality that has been explored throughout all post-colonial theory and literature. One of the starkest examples of this comes from Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The short but powerful novel follows the life of Okonkwo, a wealthy and revered warrior of the Umuofia clan in lower Nigeria;⁶⁴ and charts his fall from grace, redemption, and fatal struggle to protect and preserve his village and their traditions following the arrival of "the white man"⁶⁵ and Christianity. After closely following in the steps of Okonkwo, the book ends tragically as he commits suicide in shame after failing to match the resources and strength of the colonial invaders. The final paragraph of the book suddenly switches to the perspective of the colonial leader and ends starkly:

In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilisation to different parts of Africa, he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a dead man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Everyday brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.⁶⁶

Through this sudden shift in focus from Okonkwo's personal odyssey, Achebe brutally highlights the colonial force's power over knowledge and how the editing and rewriting of history has the capacity to completely erase portions of it. The life of Okonkwo is relegated to

⁶⁴ Colonialism in Nigeria, in particular, will also be dealt with in the next chapter when examining the Benin Bronzes from the ancient kingdom of Benin.

⁶⁵ Achebe, 2001: 130.

⁶⁶ *ibid*: 151.

a mere anecdote. Achebe's poignant and emotive final paragraph demonstrates how often entire histories and cultural identities have been condensed into one 'reasonable paragraph' – or one museum label – hiding the true reality and tragedy that colonialism incurs.

Knowledge and the way we interact with it is changing. Thus, the museum needs to refigure its position from a 'keeper' of knowledge to a 'sharer'. Forms of discipline such as the control on knowledge do “serve to explain and examine many of the pedagogical techniques used in education and the power that is applied to its subjects.”⁶⁷ At the basest level, a clear power dynamic exists between a teacher and pupil – one is seeking knowledge, the other has the means to give it. This is the same dynamic that exists in the museum. However, the museum needs to change the way they think about their own authority and instead subscribe to a philosophy in closer keeping with that of Thomas Jefferson: “He who lights a taper at mine receives light without darkening me.”⁶⁸ Instead of remaining as a panopticon of authority, the museum can begin to share the light from their taper and once again position themselves as centres of ideas, facts and truth – not of control, censorship and authority. John Naisbitt made the observation that “we are drowning in information but are starved for knowledge.”⁶⁹ This is particularly true for the museum visitor. We are so overloaded with information that we are not gaining any actual insight from it and remain deprived of a proper understanding of the truth. It is vital that colonised countries be allowed control the narrative of their history once more. In the same way that the Moai Hava is not on display, the next chapter will look at access in the museum and how it is similarly restricted in the case of the Benin Bronzes.

⁶⁷ Hillier and Hillier, 2012: 65.

⁶⁸ From a letter dated 13th August 1813, from Thomas Jefferson to Isaac MacPherson. *In* Jefferson, 1905: 334.

⁶⁹ Naisbitt, 1988: 17.

CHAPTER 3

Access and the Benin Bronzes

“Big Brother is Watching You.”¹

~ George Orwell

Any kind of institutional space, be it the prison or the museum, will always have a certain ‘Big Brother’ comparability to it. In both of these controlled spaces, there are codes of behaviour that must be adhered to and the extent to which this is done is closely monitored by security guards and CCTV. This is, of course, a pragmatic step to ensure the safety of other inmates – or the preservation and safety of priceless cultural items. However, many of these restrictions are imposed as a result of the architecture of the physical space and are not in place to protect anything except the institution itself. The museum in conjunction with this idea of access (or lack thereof) is most in keeping with the spatial and temporal effects of the architecture of the prison and the design of the Panopticon. Access will be explored in this chapter in a number of ways. Firstly, how the architecture of the museum acts in a similar way as “the panoptic schema ... to spread throughout the social body ... to become a generalised function.”² The Benin ‘Bronzes’ (*Fig. 3.4-5*) will then be employed as a case study to exhibit how the museum has the power to withhold objects from the public, further regulating access and knowledge. In terms of cultural heritage debates, the Benin Bronzes have stood at the forefront alongside the Parthenon Marbles; and for both of these respective countries (Nigeria and Greece), “this cultural property is considered an indispensable component in the formation of a national identity.”³ For many, the biggest contention is that “the British still hold the power and the final verdict on whether the Nigerians and other Africans have access to their cultural past.”⁴ However, one of the ways in which we can begin to add more nuance and care into the poetics and politics of exhibiting other cultures is through greater access to the museum’s collections.⁵

A control of access constitutes a control of space. How we move in a museum is carefully managed and curated and ideas about our expected behaviour have been forged over

¹ Orwell, 2000: 3.

² Foucault, 2020: 207.

³ Coombes, 1996: 143.

⁴ Kiwara-Wilson, 2012: 394.

⁵ Lidchi, 1997.

many years through a “form of habits.”⁶ The experience of a museum begins outside of it. On approach, the visitor is faced with an architecture that “emits a certain aura” and projects a “sense of atmospheric space.”⁷ With the same desired effect as panoptic architecture, the museum was designed to “make a symbolic statement.”⁸ The effect of the grandness and permanence of these institutions provokes a certain awe that creates a “behavioural setting,”⁹ where it seems inappropriate to speak above hushed tones or to run. Thus, museums are at once a place of “interwoven spatial layers”¹⁰ and spaces of “social distinction.”¹¹ They are, as Foucault described the prison:

An architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen, or to observe the external space, but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it sheltered, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.¹²

Hence, the effect of this authority over space acts on both the visitors and the objects in the collections simultaneously. In true panoptic fashion, the building itself plays as important a role as the people who govern it.

Space is used, in almost all forms of control and power, to command a population and to qualify authority – the prison walls enclose the inmates; a prison cell confines the prisoner. Thus, both the museum and the prison “in organizing ‘cells’, ‘places’ and ‘ranks’ ... create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional, and hierarchical.”¹³ Moreover, the very essence of the colonial mission constituted a dominion over space (and large areas of it, at that). In our current period of ‘post-’colonialism, it has been noted that “as the border is to the nation state so the museum is to empire.”¹⁴ While there may be a lack of colonial land borders, the architecture of the museum instead works to create a physical and psychological border around its collections and visitors. The way in which we move around the museum is planned. Layout, groups of rooms, signage and room numbering – as also laid out in plans all

⁶ Foucault, 2020: 131.

⁷ Tröndle, 2014: 4.

⁸ Giebelhausen, 2006: 231.

⁹ Tröndle, 2014: 5.

¹⁰ *ibid*: 4.

¹¹ *ibid*: 4.

¹² Foucault, 2020: 172.

¹³ Foucault, 2020: 148.

¹⁴ Hicks, 2020: 17.

‘direct’ us to move in particular ways. ‘Attention’ is a key consideration when designing exhibition spaces and analysing visitor behaviour. Tröndle has observed that:

It is not only the architecture (symbolic, representational, ornamental) and presentation modes (curatorial staging, creation of a specific atmosphere) that show the increased focus on directed attention, but also visitation rituals (slow, contemplative walking; silent or discreet communication).¹⁵

The muted atmosphere and elegant displays of the traditional museum gallery are meticulously constructed to ensure that visitors match that same level of reverence.

The idea of access, and the inseparable inverse of it, creates an alienating environment for many. The framework of the museum, as a world of professional experts, can result in the ‘othering’ of its visitors, making them ‘outsiders’.¹⁶ This is something that will be explicitly seen and later discussed when looking at a scene from the 2018 film, *Black Panther*. This power dynamic between the cultural elite and the everyday layman can result in a lack of inclusivity as it acts towards “implicitly encouraging people to exclude themselves.”¹⁷ People should not be made to feel alienated when looking at their own culture and heritage, particularly in a museum, in which, having been “founded on citizenship, there should be no outsiders.”¹⁸ This type of (often, unintentional) inaccessibility can occur as a result of remnants of imperial arrogance, but it can also be connected with the modern museum’s origins in court societies.¹⁹ From their conception, they were places that were zoned for the (male) upper class and evidence of this social divide remains today.

Museums are advertised and classed as public spaces. However, the museum’s “incessant control of an enclosed space, acts in conjunction with the police, to control, unrestricted and free, public space.”²⁰ Foucault defines the word ‘subject’ as “subject to someone else by control and dependence.”²¹ Henceforth, in the museum context, both the visitors and the collections can be classed as ‘subjects’. They both depend on the control of the museum – the objects: in how/ if they are exhibited; the visitors: in how/ when/ if they are allowed to see something. Access to museums presents an administrative problem for museum

¹⁵ Tröndle, 2014: 6.

¹⁶ Fyfe, 2016: 58.

¹⁷ *ibid*: 58.

¹⁸ *ibid*: 58.

¹⁹ *ibid*: 60.

²⁰ Johnson, 2014: 6.

²¹ Hillier and Hillier, 2012: 62.

officials. This problem has mainly been solved through a control of activity in the form of a “timetable”²² – both a “technique of power and a procedure of knowledge.”²³ Prisons run on strict schedules and routine and the public museum is no different. Opening and closing times are rigid – except when it is to the benefit of the museum itself. Galas and private functions are often held in the British Museum’s galleries. These include fundraisers or corporate events for large organisations, such as their controversial financial supporter, BP.²⁴ This type of access is only for the privileged and only available when it will benefit the museum itself.

Whilst temporal restrictions in the traditional sense will always remain, in the digital world they are becoming increasingly dismantled. Especially since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, people have become more heavily reliant on online resources, which are available 24 hours, seven days a week. Websites such as *Google Arts and Culture* allow visitors to employ ‘Street View’ and to embark on their own virtual tours around museums and cultural spaces.²⁵ The British Museum is one of the museums included on this website. Using virtual tools, users of the website can move from room to room throughout the museum’s galleries. Below is a view of the Benin Bronzes Room (*Fig. 3.1*) as seen using ‘Street View’ on Google Arts and Culture.

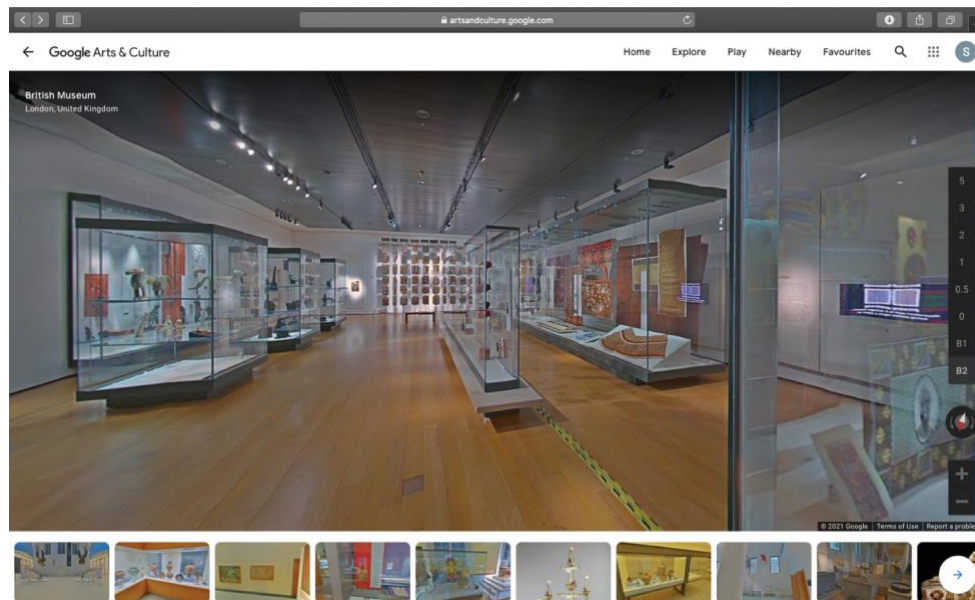


Fig. 3.1. A screenshot of Room 25 in the British Museum containing the Benin Bronzes display as seen using the ‘Street View’ tool on *Google Arts and Culture*.

²² Foucault, 2020: 149.

²³ *ibid*: 148.

²⁴ Similarly, Yannis Hamilakis describes instances where the Duveen Gallery, which houses the Parthenon Marbles, has been made available for hire for corporate and royal dinners and events. Hamilakis reports that at these events, guests were even given imitation Greek and Roman dress to wear. *In* Hamilakis, 2007: 266.

²⁵ ‘British Museum’, *Google Arts and Culture*.

Users can further navigate around the room and examine the objects on display (*Fig. 3.2*).

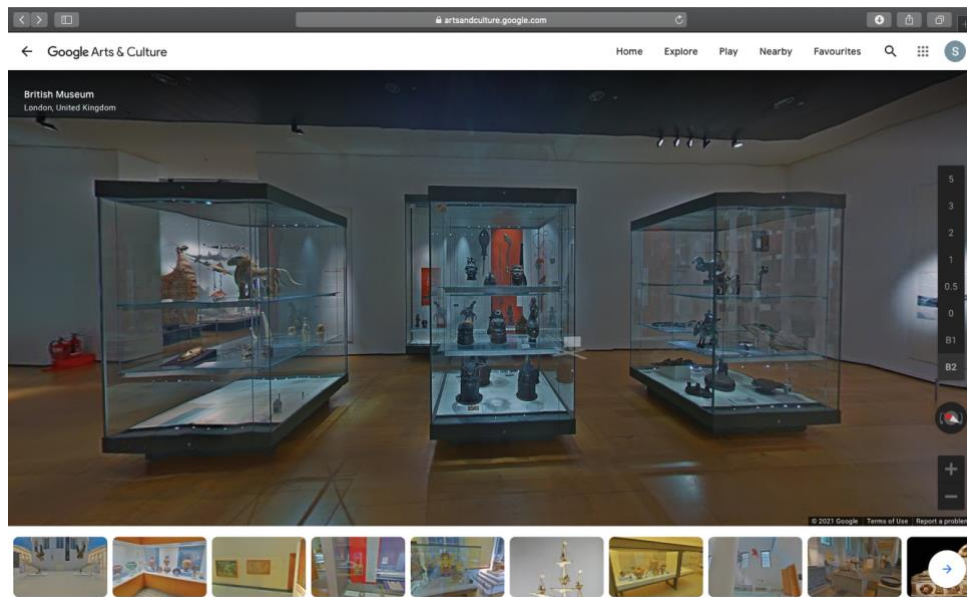


Fig. 3.2. A screenshot showing an alternative view of the Benin Bronze display in Room 25 of the British Museum on *Google Arts and Culture*.

Users even have the option to step closer to a display (*Fig. 3.3*).

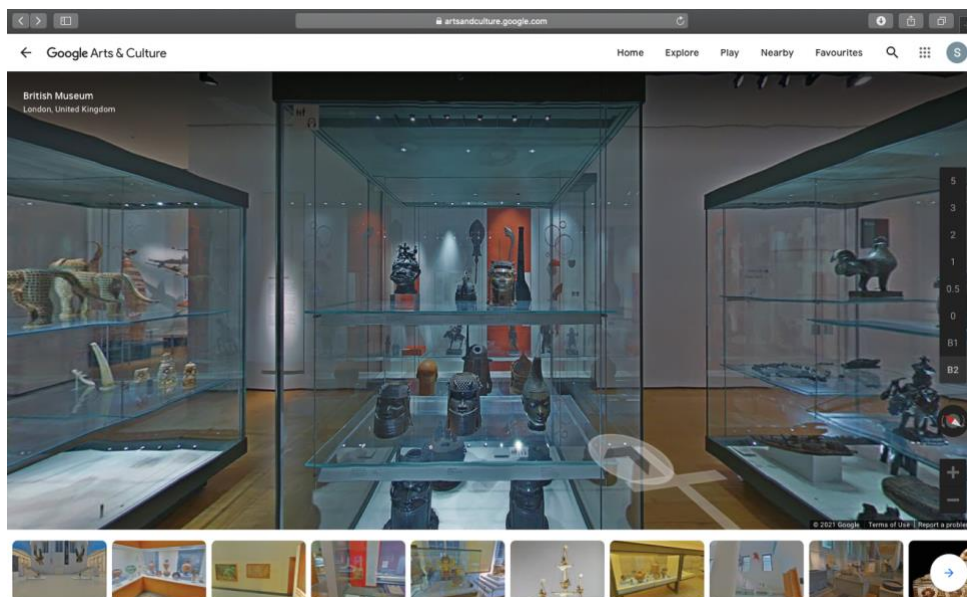


Fig. 3.3. A screenshot from *Google Arts and Culture* showing a closer view of a Benin Bronzes display in Room 25 in the British Museum.

Access is widely available in this way and through this resource, opening hours cease to exist in the museum. However, this is still a restricted form of access. As can be seen from *Fig. 3.3*,

there is a limit as to how close one can go to the display in this particular programme. Within the alternative main *Google* view one can travel geographically and through time, allowing a close-up view of a number of selected objects in much more detail.²⁶ However, in either case, the user is fully dependant on what information the museum decides to make available in partnership with this platform. The interface does not support high resolution images and often, there are no interactive museum labels.²⁷



Fig. 3.4. A selection of brass plaques from Benin on display in the British Museum.

The Benin ‘Bronzes’ (*Fig. 3.4*) are a collection of thousands of brass, bronze and ivory sculptures and carvings, originally from the ancient kingdom of Benin in Edo state, Southern Nigeria. The beginning of the production of these objects is thought to date to the 16th century.²⁸ They were created through the process of *cire perdue* (lost-wax casting) and are celebrated at the highest levels for the ingenuity of their design and their artistic achievement. The Bronzes portray a rich and varied range of subject matters. The relief brass plaques seen in *Fig. 3.4* originally decorated the walls of the palace and depicted images of the *Oba* (King) and generations of the royal family. The plaques give insight into ritual practices and features such as ceremonial dress and weaponry. One plaque in particular is favoured by the British Museum in their publications and illustrates European encounters with the kingdom of Benin (*Fig. 3.5*).

²⁶ ‘The Museum of the World’, *The British Museum with Google*.

²⁷ Clerkin and Taylor, 2021: 166.

²⁸ Eboreime, 2000: 73.



Fig. 3.5. A brass plaque entitled ‘*Oba* with Europeans’ currently housed in the British Museum.

This plaque shows the imposing central figure of the *Oba*, flanked by two kneeling attendants. He is adorned in full ceremonial regalia and holds a high-relief axe in his right hand. The *Oba*’s control over trade is represented by the much smaller and less impressive European figures suspended over his shoulders. These two smaller Portuguese traders are visibly and artistically less remarkable, being rendered in lower relief and in less elaborate detail. This plaque is interesting in many regards. Primarily, it shows how the rulers and artists of Benin conceptualised these European ‘visitors’ into their own lived experience and social structure. However, it also demonstrates the Eurocentric bias found across Western displays as this particular plaque is given privileged access online due to its European dynamic.

Although, in a colonial setting the objects were downplayed as being of a primitive nature, this is not the case now. In fact, Wysocki Gunsch has explored the significance of the decision to promote the Benin Bronzes as ‘art objects’ and not as ‘ethnographica’.²⁹ She explains that an art object is “an object that speaks to the viewer due to its expressive and aesthetic appeal,”³⁰ whereas an ethnographic object “forms a locus for speech; it is an object that documents the conversation among producers, users, and scholars about its intended use and surrounding cultural beliefs.”³¹ In terms of collecting and curating, it benefits the museum if objects such as the Benin Bronzes are classed as ‘art’ instead of ‘ethnographica’, as art is

²⁹ Wysocki Gunsch, 2013: 30.

³⁰ *ibid*: 22.

³¹ *ibid*: 22.

much easier to commodify mentally. The Bronzes were looted and taken by British soldiers during a so-called ‘punitive expedition’ over a period of three weeks between 9th and 27th February 1897.³² Details of the events leading up to and including this expedition refer back to the discussion in the previous chapter about knowledge and altered histories. In the case of the Benin Bronzes, this story too has been curated and controlled.

The kingdom of Benin was known in Europe through its popularised fetishisation as the ‘City of Blood’.³³ It was this sensationalised barbarity that allowed Britain to frame its colonial mission as a ‘civilising one’, despite the fact that it was really the *Oba* of Benin’s monopoly on trade in the area which they wished to dismantle. Before the punitive expedition, a small consulate of nine British officials were sent to speak to the *Oba* and persuade him to stop restricting the British trade route. The British were warned not to come as they would be interrupting an important religious festival. They arrived anyway to put pressure on the King and the nine men were killed as a result. This event allowed the British the opportunity to send their punitive expedition, but contemporary sources show that an expedition was being planned up to four years before this took place. In July 1892, Vice Consul Galway wrote in his report on the Benin District Oil Rivers Protectorate:

The king [*Oba*] struck me as being very ready to listen to reason but is tied down by fetish customs, and until the power of the fetish priests is done away with, the trade of the Benin country will continue to be a very doubtful source of profit to any great extent.³⁴

There had also been many reports of the ritual of human sacrifice in the kingdom of Benin since the Portuguese first had contact with the area in the 15th century.³⁵ Reports such as those of Captain John Adams in 1823, also gave the British the opportunity to justify its “military expedition as a civilising act because of these alleged evils, whereas the motives for imperialism were basically geopolitical and economic”³⁶:

Human sacrifices are not so frequent here as in some other parts of Africa; yet besides those performed on the death of great men, three or four are

³² Hicks, 2020: 110.

³³ Osadolor and Otoide, 2008: 408.

³⁴ *In* Hicks, 2020: 67.

³⁵ Osadolor and Otoide, 2008: 404.

³⁶ *ibid*: 407.

annually sacrificed at the mouth of the river, as votive offerings to the sea, to direct vessels to bind their course to this horrid climate.³⁷

Additionally, the expedition was reportedly revenge for the British embassy being innocently and mercilessly killed, however, Galway's published recollection paints a picture of a less one-sided exchange with a much more balanced number of casualties: "I was therefore the first to visit the scene of the massacre. About a mile of the road was strewn with bodies."³⁸

Today, the violence of the punitive expedition is not advertised in the British Museum's galleries. The labels are written passively and explain that 'objects were plundered' but not that 'the British plundered objects'.³⁹ A limited and controlled narrative is to be found online and in the gallery itself where there are substantial gaps in the greater detail. The texts provided do "not communicate sufficiently the sheer scale and violence of the operation."⁴⁰ With further regards to omission, the British Museum offer downloadable classroom resources and school activities on the Benin Bronzes.⁴¹ These are superb guides for teachers and ways to engage children on visits to the galleries. However within these resources, the colonial context is completely ignored. As mentioned in the previous chapter, British leaders of the expedition are attributed as the 'Previous Owners' and 'Excavator/ Field Collectors' in the museum catalogue. Captain Herbert Sutherland Walker documented this supposed 'field collection' in his diary: "All the stuff of any value found in the King's palace and surrounding houses has been collected ... The whole camp is strewn with loot."⁴² Similarly, George le Clerc Egerton wrote out his to-do list two days after the city was taken:

Work to be done Saturday 20th February
Cots and stretches to be prepared for the sick.
Ju-Ju houses to be blown down.
Walls + houses to be knocked down.
Queen Mother's house to be burnt.⁴³

³⁷ Adams, 1823: 115.

³⁸ Hicks, 2020: 93.

³⁹ McEwan, 2021.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ 'Classroom Resource: The Art of Benin', *The British Museum*.

⁴² Extract from the diary of Captain Herbert Sutherland Walker, 20th February 1897. *In* Hicks, 2020: 141-2.

⁴³ Extract from diary of George le Clerc Egerton, recorded two days after the city was taken in February 1897. *In* Hicks, 2020: 130.

It is clear from these sources that this was by no means an ‘excavation’; and neither were the materials treated nor removed in an archaeologically mindful way. Even with our access to the British Museum’s catalogue, we are still denied access to the true provenance.

The exact number of objects taken is unknown as many still reside in private collections throughout the world. Author and curator, Dan Hicks, has made monumental efforts in his most recent work, which will be discussed later, to acknowledge the difficulty of trying to account for this material and of the cultural impact its continued loss has. It is estimated that around 10,000 royal and sacred objects were removed, with the majority on display across approximately 161 museums and institutions in Europe and North America.⁴⁴ The British Museum is thought to have 900 pieces⁴⁵ but claim to be unable to publish a definitive list of their Benin collection.⁴⁶ Of these estimated 900 pieces, only about 10% appear in a “permanent changing display”⁴⁷ and the rest are held in storage and the public have no physical access to them. The British Museum state that all of the pieces in their possession can be found available via their Online Collections.⁴⁸ Thus, ‘access’ is dealt with on a complex variety of levels. The Bronzes are either: on display; not on display but catalogued online; published in a book or catalogue and available to buy. The lack of physical access is the main focus of this chapter and it can be found to be further restricted beyond curatorial decisions. If rooms are closed, either for staffing problems or maintenance issues (or to avoid unwanted attention from unauthorised and unofficial tours, which will be discussed in the conclusion), then further spatial control is at play.

The issue of restricted access in museums, specifically with regards to African ethnographic objects, was brought to life on the big screen in Ryan Coogler’s 2018 addition to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Black Panther*. The movie includes a scene in which Erik ‘Killmonger’ Stevens, played by Michael B. Jordan, visits the fictitious ‘Museum of Great Britain’. The scene opens with him standing looking at a case of African objects in the West African Wing. He is being closely watched by security guards. A white curator approaches him, who is known to be the “expert”⁴⁹ on the artefacts and offers to tell him about the works. Killmonger asks a number of questions about the objects on display, specifically about their origin and provenance. He then focuses on one particular axe and is told that it is a 7th century

⁴⁴ Hicks, 2020: 3; 8.

⁴⁵ ‘Benin Bronzes’, *The British Museum*.

⁴⁶ Hicks, 2020: 237.

⁴⁷ ‘Benin Bronzes’, *The British Museum*.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Coogler, 2018: 15:24-16:54

object from Benin.⁵⁰ However, Killmonger immediately contradicts this, the museum curator is visibly taken aback yet amused at this challenge to her authority: “It was taken by British soldiers in Benin but it’s from Wakanda and it’s made out of Vibranium. Don’t trip, I’ll take it off your hands for you”⁵¹ When the director protests the works aren’t for sale, Killmonger retorts: “How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else.”⁵² After a struggle with museum security, the scene ends with Killmonger reclaiming the axe. As Casey Haughin investigated in her essay, *Why Museum Professionals need to talk about Black Panther*, this scene really presents the reality of the museum as an “illegal mechanism of colonialism and along with that a space which does not even welcome those whose culture it displays.”⁵³ Following the resulting backlash against the British Museum and discussions over their ownership and monopoly over access to African objects, a spokesperson for the museum said:

We try to be transparent about the ways in which objects have been collected, particularly during the colonial period ... Any film that draws attention to the importance of these objects is to be welcomed. Here in the British Museum, over six million people a year are able to access African objects on public display, free of charge, and in a global context alongside the stories of other cultures ... we believe there is a great public benefit to displaying these objects in the context of a world collection, so audiences can see and understand the significance of African objects and can understand the interconnectedness of world cultures.⁵⁴

As has been seen with regards to the provenance of the Benin Bronzes, the museum is still a long way from reaching a point of full ‘transparency’. Similarly, this ‘public benefit’ applies to everyone except the people of Nigeria.

There have been countless pleas for repatriation and restoration of the Benin Bronzes. This includes calls for them to be lent to Nigerian museums for periods of time, but nearly all of these requests have been denied. In a similar to move to the Greeks, as will be seen in the next chapter, the Nigerians have even constructed a purpose-built museum, the ‘Benin Royal Museum’, to house the stolen artefacts and to quell any argument that there is nowhere safe

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Cascone, 2018.

and suitable to display the precious works in Nigeria. This is still an issue of contention, both in Greece and Nigeria, as “people find it offensive that their return is conditional on the construction of a museum.”⁵⁵ Comparisons of these types of claims have even been compared to *Kunstschutz*, the fascist process of seizing art to keep it safe.⁵⁶ In recent years, there has been more positive movement in the way of repatriations. The Hunt Museum in Limerick is currently in the process of returning an ivory and lead leopard’s head, originally a ceremonial costume attachment, from their collection.⁵⁷ Germany, whose Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin holds more than 500 Benin pieces, has also pledged to begin making returns in 2022.⁵⁸ However, hundreds still remain in the British Museum, which needs to begin follow in the footsteps of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford which are actively working towards decolonising their collections and are openly critical of those, such as Neil MacGregor, who has been quoted as referring to the repatriating of museum artefacts as part of a “culture war.”⁵⁹ This seems to be the stance that is widely held by British Museum officials as Hartwig Fischer, the current Director of the British Museum, has referred to the removal of heritage from its cultural context as a “creative act.”⁶⁰ Unless the authorities behind these institutions come to see that “the theft of an object by a European museum is a negative act,”⁶¹ access will continue to be withheld from the subjected people.

Culturally, the British conquest of Benin was a “watershed event”⁶² and in *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and the Case for Restitution*, Dan Hicks’s recent tour de force against the institution of the museum and the “sheer brutishness of their continued displays of violently-taken loot,”⁶³ he acknowledges his past complicity as a curator but calls for change and disruption to the current framework of museum authority and ownership of ethnographic objects. “The colonial museum has failed,”⁶⁴ is the passionate and definitive underlying argument that Hicks makes. He offers a personal account of how museums are guilty of perpetuating colonial violence and vehemently calls for change by strongly advocating equal access and the sharing of information. In a similar exploration to that of African academics, Osadolor and Otoide, Hicks explores how “British imperial

⁵⁵ Philips, 2020.

⁵⁶ Hicks, 2020: 200.

⁵⁷ O’Rourke, 2021.

⁵⁸ ‘Benin Bronzes: Germany to Return Looted Artefacts to Nigeria’, *BBC*, 2021.

⁵⁹ In Hicks, 2020: 204.

⁶⁰ Brown, 2019.

⁶¹ Hicks, 2020: 32.

⁶² Barkan, 1997: 36.

⁶³ Hicks, 2020: xiii.

⁶⁴ *ibid*: 10.

historiography has catered to British interests.”⁶⁵ The emphasis on the Kingdom of Benin as being a barbaric and degraded civilisation was an important feature in the British colonial psychology. This was something they were already acutely familiar with in relation to the “representation of what was euphemistically referred to as the ‘Orient’”⁶⁶ in the West. For the online launch of this book in 2020, there was an entrance fee for everyone who wanted to attend, except for people from the continent of Africa.⁶⁷ This gesture represents the overall message of the book that if complete repatriation is not possible, people should absolutely have unrestricted, unquestioned and unbridled access to their own culture.

Dan Hicks has pondered whether museums are “just neutral containers of a universal heritage, displaying a common cultural patrimony?”⁶⁸ As has been seen by the way in which our physical access and movement in time and space is closely controlled in a museum context and, how parts of the collection are not on display to the general public, Hicks’ answer to his own question is upheld: “For as long as they continue to display sacred and royal objects looted during colonial massacres, they will remain the very inverse of all this.”⁶⁹ In short, restitution “allows the victims to move from being history’s objects to its subjects”⁷⁰ ... or in Foucauldian terms, to finally move away from being an “object of information”⁷¹ to being a “subject in communication.”⁷² In his examination of prisons and their similarity to all state institutions, Foucault directs “analytical attention to the often mundane rules embedded in practices that govern what can be said, known, and done, by whom and to whom.”⁷³ These rules may seem mundane in the museum context – ‘no running’, ‘no photos’ etc. – but violation of these rules could see your access to the museum being revoked. People have argued that “abandoning the heritage authority and the remoteness that museums traditionally maintained in their relations with their audiences may ultimately undermine the legitimacy and the very identity of these institutions.”⁷⁴ However, it is important to remember that the aim of critics of museum authority is “not to change the content of the art museum but to approximate its identity to that of the public so as to provide the public with access to art.”⁷⁵ It should be more important that

⁶⁵ *ibid*: xiii.

⁶⁶ Coombes, 1996: 145.

⁶⁷ ‘Launch: ‘The Brutish Museums’ by Dan Hicks’, *Eventbrite*.

⁶⁸ Hicks, 2020: 3.

⁶⁹ *ibid*: 3.

⁷⁰ Kiwara-Wilson, 2012: 395.

⁷¹ Foucault, 2020: 200.

⁷² *ibid*: 200.

⁷³ Power, 2011: 39.

⁷⁴ Pulh and Mernacarelli, 2015: 49.

⁷⁵ De Miguel De Blas *et. al.*, 2015: 52.

there is open and transparent access to the collection than the museum retaining its uncontested authority. As visual and physical access to the large majority of the British Museum's Benin Bronzes collection is restricted, the next chapter will explore how gaze is similarly affected in the case of the caryatid from the Erechtheion.

CHAPTER 4

Gaze and the Caryatid

“The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.”¹

~ George Orwell

In terms of our senses in the museum context, one is very much privileged over the others: sight.² However, the way in which our gaze is constructed and directed can often be restrictive or misleading. This idea of ‘gaze’ in the museum is the most in keeping with the unbalanced power dynamic found in the prison framework – that of one body *being watched* and the other *watching*. At the basest level, the purpose of a museum is as a place to go where one can see physical objects on display. Thus, in the same way as Foucault considered institutions of discipline, the museum can also be recognised as a “permanent observatory.”³ The caryatid from the Erechtheion on the Acropolis of Athens (*Fig. 4.2*) accounts for one part of the highly contested ‘Parthenon Marbles’, taken by Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, between 1801 and 1803, that are now housed in the British Museum. These objects have come to symbolise “the entire body of repatriated cultural property in the world’s museums and private collections.”⁴ The issue surrounding the Parthenon Marbles has always been contentious and divisive. For the many who wish to see the Parthenon Marbles returned to Greece, their presence in the British Museum reduces them to merely “an example of imperial arrogance manifest in marble.”⁵ Throughout history, Lord Elgin has been considered a plunderer and a thief – to the effect that the term ‘Elginisme’ was coined to refer to the act of removing cultural property.⁶ However, the sentiment of the British Museum (and the British government in recent statements) is one that portrays Elgin’s removal of the statues as a ‘creative act’; and Elgin as the saviour of the best of Greek art.⁷ The caryatid will be the focus

¹ Orwell, 2000: 92.

² Fyfe, 2016: 78. *See also* Crary, 1992.

³ Foucault, 2020: 126.

⁴ Merryman, 2000: 35.

⁵ Gordimer, 2008: vii.

⁶ Merryman, 2000: 45.

⁷ *See* Brown, 2019; Luckhurst, 2004; Jones, 2019; Barnes, 2020.

of consideration in this chapter because the way in which visitors see it in the British Museum continuously feeds into Greece's fight for restitution and the public's perception of the object.

The museum is a space of "hierarchical observation"⁸ – a space where "thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the 'physics' of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics."⁹ Unlike in the previous chapters where we have seen power exhibited through the control of historical narratives and physical access, in this particular consequence of panoptic institutions, power is "manifested only by its gaze."¹⁰ Gosden and Marshall have explored how objects are "passive, inert material to which things happen and things are done"¹¹; and what is 'being done' in the museum context, as categorised by Foucault as a form of 'discipline',¹² is an enforcement of the imposition of a state of constant visibility on the displays. As these subjects truly are 'passive and inert things', their unchallenged visibility "assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them."¹³ Neanette Snoep has asked, "who has the authority to define culture?"¹⁴ This question can really be expanded to ask: who has the authority to categorise it; to control how it is seen; and to alter an object biography? The meaning of an object changes depending on how it is exhibited but also "according to who was viewing it,"¹⁵ and it is because of this that museum objects are never considered to be "stable."¹⁶

Objects in museum collections are frequently "decontextualised from their daily and ritual use and recreated as material heritage in the museum context."¹⁷ This is primarily due to a shift in focus from an object's 'cult value' to its 'exhibition value'.¹⁸ Especially in the case of anthropomorphic objects or material culture, Fiona Bowie has recognised our tendency to use them as a "classificatory mechanism."¹⁹ As a result of the "commonality of our bodies,"²⁰ we use these objects as convenient ways to assume things about societies. These assumptions can manifest themselves in how we choose to display an object. For example in the museum context, objects are often shown "upright, enlarged, or in pride of place."²¹ Not only can this

⁸ Foucault, 2020: 170.

⁹ *ibid*: 177.

¹⁰ *ibid*: 188.

¹¹ Gosden and Marshall, 1999: 169.

¹² Foucault, 2020: 187.

¹³ *ibid*: 187.

¹⁴ Snoep, 2020: 335.

¹⁵ Alberti, 2005: 568.

¹⁶ *ibid*: 569.

¹⁷ Augustat, 2021: 283.

¹⁸ Benjamin, 1969: 7.

¹⁹ Bowie, 2006: 35.

²⁰ *ibid*: 35.

²¹ Goodison and Morris, 2012: 268.

misinform the viewer of how the objects would have been seen/ used in their original context, it often even misleads the viewer of the object's importance. An object being shown backlit and singularly can similarly ascribe it greater significance than it might have had; and it is for reasons like these that figurines and statues are continuously (mis)interpreted as deities. In a large number of these cases, the object's original use or purpose remains unknown. Conversely for the remaining instances, it is clear from existing evidence that this focus and importance was not attributed to them at the time of their conception. The way the museum curates our gaze repeatedly gives these incorrect impressions.

A shift in object biography and intended use results in objects becoming anachronisms.²² In other words, they become displaced in time. The idea of the alienation of objects is something that is frequently discussed in relation to the biographies of museum objects and as will be discussed later, is a very pertinent term in the case of the caryatid. The idea of objects "accumulating histories"²³ means that object biographies are often thought to enrich an object. However, Dan Hicks is critical of this viewpoint that has "served to stifle any discussion of enduring colonial violence over time, so a second idea has served to hold back dialogue and action on cultural restitution in the present: the idea of entanglement."²⁴ In other words, this idea supported by institutions that "objects can be understood through looking at the cultural contexts which originally produced them and the new circumstance into which they later moved,"²⁵ is often used as an excuse for their continued contested presence in the museum. In fact, museums recognise that the value of the object is not only due to its rich social life but also because "value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged."²⁶ Moreover, "objects that resist our desire to possess them are called valuable,"²⁷ and this is one of the major reasons why the Parthenon Marbles have relentlessly stood at the forefront of cultural heritage debate.

The caryatid was removed from the Acropolis at a time when "diplomacy and archaeology were acutely intertwined."²⁸ At the time of the Marbles' removal, Lord Elgin was the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Using this position, Elgin was able to acquire a *firman* from the Turkish government for his intended removal of the Parthenon Marbles. Hamilakis supports the common criticism of Elgin that this culminated from an abuse of power: "He employed bribery and threats to convince the local Ottoman authorities in Athens to turn

²² Augustat, 2021: 299.

²³ Gosden and Marshall, 1999: 170.

²⁴ Hicks, 2020: 26.

²⁵ Gosden and Marshall, 1999: 174.

²⁶ Appadurai, 1986: 3.

²⁷ *ibid*: 3.

²⁸ Challis, 2006: 35.

a blind eye to his activities.”²⁹ It was through the employment of this *firman* that Elgin succeeded in removing half of the original frieze of the Parthenon, 17 pedimental pieces and 15 metopes, as well as a caryatid from the porch of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis. There have been many doubts over the legitimacy of the *firman*, especially since it was granted by the Turkish power in Greece at the time, not the Greeks themselves. The *firman*, as a legal document, is one of the main arguments used by supporters of Elgin and advocates for the retention of the Marbles in Britain to prove that Elgin acted completely legally and as was granted to him. The legality of the *firman* is not the only factor that remains questioned. There has also been debate over its translation. The only surviving copy of the document is in Italian and uses the word *qualche*. This can be translated to mean ‘some’ or ‘any’.³⁰ Thus, the existence of a *firman* is not the centre of the debate, it is instead the extent of what the *firman* allowed, and the extent to which Elgin capitalised on this ambiguity.



Fig. 4.1. The Caryatid Porch of the Erechtheion on the Acropolis of Athens.

The Caryatid Porch (*Fig. 4.1*) on the south side of the Erechtheion comprises of six columns in the shape of Classical Greek women. The Erechtheion was built during Pericles’ great architectural project on the Acropolis in the 5th Century BC and was used to house the olivewood *xoanon* (ξύανον, ‘cult-statue’) of Athena. Crafted from Pentelic marble, the caryatids are a developed form of archaic *korai* statues. They incorporate staple features of Classical sculpture such as the ‘wet-look’ drapery of their clothes and their more dynamic stances (*Fig. 4.1-2*). Although all six caryatids are of the same style and wear the same form

²⁹ Hamilakis, 2007: 251.

³⁰ Luckhurst, 2004.

of dress – a belted Doric *peplos* and a short *himation* – they are not identically executed (*Fig. 4.5*). This is most apparent from the reverse of the statues where their unique, intricately plaited hairstyles can be seen. In most cases in the museum context, objects are shown as part of a group and each object is “seen in the light of the previous one.”³¹ However, this is not the case of the single caryatid that is housed in the British Museum. Not only is the rest of the group to be found in a different country (in the Acropolis Museum in Athens; *Fig. 4.5*), but the caryatid is not even to be seen in the same gallery as the rest of the Parthenon Marbles (*Fig. 4.2*). Thus, there are multiple layers of alienation associated with the caryatid: it is alienated from its sculpture group back in Greece; it is alienated from its original context as part of the Caryatid Porch of the Erechtheion; and it is alienated from its modern context as being one of the infamous ‘Parthenon Marbles’ removed by Lord Elgin.



Fig. 4.2. The caryatid from the Erechtheion on display in the British Museum.

In their exhibition of the caryatid (*Fig. 4.2*), the British Museum has attempted to display the fact that the caryatid was originally an architectural feature (a supporting column). This is done through the inclusion of a section of an architrave above. However, when compared with the

³¹ Vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh, 2001: 198.

spectacular views surrounding the caryatid porch on the Acropolis (*Fig. 4.1*), or the display of the other remaining caryatids in Athens (*Fig. 4.5*), it is poorly executed.

The human form of the caryatid and the significance of the Parthenon Marbles in issues of cultural heritage results in her having become a kind of ‘poster-girl’ for Otherness in exile: a prisoner of colonialism.³² Some artefacts, and especially statues, are often attributed the identity of persons with human properties and emotional reactions, as previously seen in the case of Hoa Hakananai’a. The personification and anthropomorphising of the caryatid is not a new phenomenon, but something that stretches back in folk memory to her separation from her sisters and a frequent image in pop-culture is one of the caryatids mourning their abducted sister (*Fig. 4.3*).



Fig. 4.3. A poster by Greek photographer Ares Kalogeropoulos used in his campaign for the return of the Parthenon Marbles (24th April 2012).

Hamilakis recounts folk stories from the time that the marbles were being transported from the Acropolis to Piraeus to be shipped to Britain. The local people who were carrying the sculptures removed by Elgin and his personnel “abandoned it half-way, as they insisted they heard the spirits of the marbles crying and protesting.”³³ Judging from this evidence, the marbles were perceived by the Greeks as belonging to the legendary sphere, not just in subject matter but in spirit.³⁴ As described by Melina Mercouri, the late former Greek Minister of Culture, it is not

³² In this section of the discussion, it seems appropriate to begin to use personal pronouns when referring to the caryatid, instead of the impersonal ‘it’, as this is the language most commonly seen when exploring the emotive and sentimental side of the issue. *See esp.* Stamatou, 2017.

³³ Hamilakis, 2007: 69.

³⁴ Hamilikas, 1999: 306.

just physical property that is imprisoned, nor just a commodity as the institution may see it, but the ‘history’ and ‘soul’ of a people.³⁵ For many, the presence of the caryatid and the rest of the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum puts the visitor in an extremely difficult viewing position, as first acknowledged by Lord Byron in his 1811 poem, *The Curse of Minerva*. He describes the conflicting feelings that are felt by the museum visitor when gazing at these objects:

In silent indignation mixed with grief,
Admires the plunder, but abhors the thief.³⁶

This is a phenomenon that has been examined by German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin, who argues that “an object can attract people (positive valence), push people away (negative valence), or do both and thus exert an ambivalent effect.”³⁷

The new Acropolis Museum in Athens is regarded as “a building whose conception and realization are laden with cultural significance as well as a polemical political agenda.”³⁸ This is for a number of reasons but primarily because the construction of the Acropolis Museum was a major way in which the Greeks fought back against claims that the “objects cannot be properly exhibited in Greece due to the lack of a proper museum, nor can they be reunited with the monument because of Athens’ notorious air pollution.”³⁹ Since the Marbles were removed in the early 19th century, Greece has been accused of being unable to provide an adequate place to house them and ensure their preservation. However, the Acropolis Museum, built in 2009 and designed by Bernard Tschumi, is truly an “unmatched place”⁴⁰ for them. The Acropolis Museum stands “in the literal and figurative shadow of the Parthenon.”⁴¹ The major feature of the museum is the Parthenon Gallery on the top floor which has been aligned with the orientation of the Parthenon itself (*Fig. 4.4*).

³⁵ Merryman, 2000: 25

³⁶ Byron, 1845.

³⁷ Tröndle, 2014: 5.

³⁸ Geraki, 2012: 63.

³⁹ Hamilakis, 2007: 259.

⁴⁰ Gordimer, 2008: ix.

⁴¹ Geraki, 2012: 63.



Fig. 4.4. The view of the Acropolis from the Parthenon Gallery in the Acropolis Museum.

The floor-to-ceiling glass windows allow the visitor to not only gaze at the sculptures themselves, but to do so with full view of their original architectural and topographic context (*Fig. 4.4*). The sculptures that comprise the Parthenon frieze are laid out as would be found on the temple, hence Tschumi recreates “the Platonic idea of the Parthenon’s presence but not the object itself.”⁴² The architecture of the museum is impressive and state-of-the-art but does not distract from the classical architecture of Periclean Athens, being accurately summed-up as a “reverent yet confident response to the complex demands”⁴³ of such a project.

One of the main differences between the display and viewing of the Marbles in Britain as opposed to Athens is that, in the British Museum, “it was the observer who was now the centre, not the sacred building of the goddess.”⁴⁴ In the British Museum, gaze is controlled in such a way as to isolate the object, whereas in the Acropolis Museum, all of the objects are seen in harmony with each other and in visual dialogue with their original cultural context. Poignant spaces are left for the sculptures that are missing, the most obvious example being the blank space left in the Caryatid Porch display (*Fig. 4.5*).

⁴² *ibid*: 70.

⁴³ *ibid*: 69.

⁴⁴ St. Clair, 1998: 304.



Fig. 4.5. The Caryatid Porch on display in the Acropolis Museum in Athens with a blank space for the missing caryatid.

The Greeks have historically been criticised for pleading on the emotive side of the Parthenon issue, but this is an emotional issue, and it is felt nowhere as strongly than when viewing that empty space (*Fig. 4.5*). Perhaps the biggest difference between these two cultural institutions is that the displays in the Acropolis Museum have not caused the same sort of intense reactions, such as demonstrations or protests, as have been triggered by what is to be seen in the British Museum. A protest that took place the day the British Museum reopened to the public in August 2020, following a period of closure due to Covid-19 regulations, saw protesters entering the galleries in Ancient Greek costume and dressed as the caryatid and Lord Elgin. They processed through the newly reopened museum holding large signs which read: #LostMyMarbles.⁴⁵ Statements in the form of dedications and signs are often left at the foot of the objects – simultaneously signs of reverence and outcry. One of the most moving examples of this was the instance upon Melina Mercouri’s death wherein flowers were left at the foot of the Marbles in the British Museum.⁴⁶ In other words, the ‘negative valence’ that is palpable for visitors in the British Museum is not to be found in the Acropolis Museum.

Janet Hoskins has asked: “Why do some objects remain provocative, while others fade from centre stage?”⁴⁷ As previously mentioned, this is primarily due to the fact that objects become “invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in,”⁴⁸ and

⁴⁵ Wichmann, 2020.

⁴⁶ Hamilakis, 2007: 254.

⁴⁷ Hoskins, 2006: 81.

⁴⁸ Gosden and Marshall, 1999: 170.

none have found themselves more in the centre of these social interactions than the Parthenon Marbles. Since the moment they were taken by Lord Elgin to today, they have been continuously debated at the highest levels of government and have divided official and public opinion. In the Commons Debate of 1816, which determined the fate of the Marbles, the House divided: For the Motion of Retaining the Marbles in Britain and housing them in the British Museum, 82; For the Return of the Marbles to Greece, 80.⁴⁹ The advent of Brexit has brought with it even more questions about the continued possession of the Parthenon Marbles in Britain. There was even an attempt by Greece, with Italy's support, to insert a clause into the 'Leave Agreement' that stipulated the return of "unlawfully removed cultural objects."⁵⁰ However, as discussed, the British government and the British Museum are firmly of the opinion that the Marbles were removed and obtained legally. The pointed clause did not make it past the draft stage of the negotiations and UK spokespersons were highly critical of this attempt at challenging the contents of their cultural institutions: "This is just not happening. And this stunt shows a troubling lack of seriousness about the negotiations on the EU side."⁵¹

The British Museum's self-given title as a world museum brings into question the argument of 'cultural nationalism' vs 'cultural internationalism'.⁵² Nationalists argue that cultural artefacts "belong to the descendants of the people who created them."⁵³ However internationalists are of the opinion that the "international circulation of antiquities serves legitimate interests because art objects can act as cultural ambassadors, overcoming prejudices and national parochialism."⁵⁴ It is clear that the British Museum argues on the side of cultural internationalism: posturing themselves as being "object-oriented, resting on the principles of preservation, truth and access."⁵⁵ Yet, this only seems to be the case when someone – being them – still controls the access. This really begs the question as to whether the British Museum (and other institutions like it) are really trying to say that their exhibits would be less universal if they were to be viewed in their original cultural context. This Foucauldian critique of the British Museum's claimed preservation and global ambassadorship challenges whether these ends can ever justify the means.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ 'The Commons Debate 1816'. In Hitchens, 1987: 137.

⁵⁰ 'Opinion', 2020.

⁵¹ Barnes, 2020.

⁵² Borodkin, 1995: 408.

⁵³ *ibid*: 408.

⁵⁴ *ibid*: 408.

⁵⁵ Kiwara-Wilson, 2012: 397.

⁵⁶ Lidchi, 1997: 198.

Dan Hicks asserts that “restitution is not subtraction,”⁵⁷ contrary to the belief of many British Museum and governmental officials. Rather, restitution is “refusing any longer to defend the indefensible.”⁵⁸ As discussed, the case of the Parthenon Marbles is an extremely emotive issue and one of the main critiques of the contest is that “emotion is easy and thinking is hard.”⁵⁹ However, as Evi Stamatiou explored in her solo show performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, *Caryatid Unplugged*, this is an issue with a lot more nuance than that. Speaking from her experience as a Greek immigrant in England, she exposed “notions of belonging and Otherness in relation to two female bodies in exile,”⁶⁰ her own and that of the caryatid. In this play, herself and the personified form of the caryatid battle with their own sense of self and belonging as their “Greek identity reaches for my Ancient Greek heritage in search of more symbolic power, but Elgin claims the Ancient Greek heritage as part of his own western identity.”⁶¹ To fully understand this issue, we must ask ourselves and answer honestly: would Elgin’s behaviour be acceptable today?⁶² If not, then why do we remain complicit in supporting the misleading presence and affected display of objects like the caryatid?

⁵⁷ Hicks, 2020: 234.

⁵⁸ *ibid*: 234.

⁵⁹ Jones, 2019.

⁶⁰ Stamatiou, 2017: 197.

⁶¹ *ibid*: 201.

⁶² Jenkins, 2018: 90.

CONCLUSION

“Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious.”¹
~ George Orwell.

This purpose of this study is truly to acknowledge how the museum as an institution exerts power and authority over the visitors and the exhibits. With this being established and building on the discussions in the previous chapters, the most important thing to consider next is: if the museum is a panopticon of control, how can this be changed or broken? One of the ways in which this power is being subverted and dismantled results from the fact that the museum is no longer the ‘keeper of knowledge’ about an object, nor can they fully control the narrative surrounding one. As seen, this is primarily due to the fact that the way in which we access knowledge has changed. We no longer live in a world where museum professionals are the “arbiters of understanding about museum collections”² and the public the “passive recipient of said understanding.”³ Before the omnipresence of social media, “museum professionals created and distributed their collections to the public in a one-on-one transaction.”⁴ However, the primacy of the internet has “allowed others to join in the creation and distribution enabling a many-to-many transaction.”⁵ Kris Wetturland rightly deduces that “social media also makes real the notion that there is more than one way of knowing about something.”⁶ As much as this advent of online awareness is bringing positive progress, the truth remains that “the damage is renewed every day that the museum doors are unlocked and these trophies are displayed to the public,”⁷ and this will not change unless there is real action taken on the part of the museum.

Often, the issues faced in cultural heritage debates are as a result of museums historically “not exercising due diligence”⁸ when compiling their collections. Crucial to a future that moves beyond this is the need for museums to start taking accountability and to put into place “clear and transparent ethical acquisition policies.”⁹ This study has, necessarily, focused on what museum do not allow; however, in more recent years, the British Museum has

¹ Orwell, 2000: 81.

² Wetturland, 2012: 89.

³ *ibid*: 89.

⁴ *ibid*: 89.

⁵ *ibid*: 89.

⁶ *ibid*: 90.

⁷ Hicks, 2020: xiv.

⁸ Brodie and Renfrew, 2005: 345.

⁹ *ibid*: 345.

started to become more open to discussion about difficult histories. They do not restrict tours to those ‘officially’ sanctioned but do not actively prevent, for example, activists such as Alice Proctor to run her ‘Uncomfortable Art Tours’ around the museum.¹⁰ These tours comprise of guided visits around the museum with a focus on the role of colonialism in the foundation of the institution and the shaping of its collection. The tagline behind these tours is “Display it Like you Stole it”¹¹ and understandably, due to such strong rhetoric, they began undercover.¹² However, the movement gained traction and soon they were a popular and available alternative option to a visit to institutions like the British Museum. The British Museum are not alone in being restrictive towards unofficial tours, museums in many countries do not allow any kind of guiding in museum spaces except by licensed guides, trained via state bodies. However, the British Museum are typically more vulnerable to the focus of such impactful ‘sales pitches’ as made by Alice Proctor. More recently on the 14th August 2021, the lobbyist group ‘BP or not BP’ hosted an online virtual tour, the ‘Stolen Goods Tour: Striking Back at the Empire’, that posited itself as a “disobedient tour calling for honesty about the past, justice in the present, and a safer climate future.”¹³ As a consequence of the ongoing financial support by oil giant, BP, the tour looked to interrogate why the British Museum remains “so keen to celebrate empires and imperialism.”¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the Museum neither encourages nor discourages tours such as these, but they also do not actively attempt to stop them.¹⁵

The Museum also has created a space that allows for protests and demonstrations to happen. These protests have yet to lead to a constructive discussion with the museum about the issue at hand but, nonetheless, the mere fact that they allow negative expressions to publicly take place in the institution is at least a step in the right direction. The fact that their online catalogue contains a section entitled ‘Contested Objects in the Museum’ also acknowledges that they have been complicit in cultural heritage issues. The next step must be for the Trustees to graduate from merely accepting the uncomfortable issues to actually becoming accountable for them. Thus, as noted by Cruickshanks, perhaps “it is useful to think of museums as having personalities rather than roles – this allows for things to be more flexible and adaptable.”¹⁶ Chaumier and Chare have stated that we need to move away from the idea that a museum is a

¹⁰ Proctor, ‘Uncomfortable Art Tours’.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Spence, 2020.

¹³ BP or not BP, 2021.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ As discussed in Chapter 3, they may not actively prevent the tour from happening, but they do have the power to close off specific rooms or areas to the public in preparation.

¹⁶ Cruickshanks, 2015: 131.

“‘mausoleum of culture’, a place in which objects are removed from social life, reduced to ... ‘material husks’, things deprived of their local vitality and significance.”¹⁷ I would argue, to counter, that in order to do this, we must also move away from the museum as a ‘prison’ of culture because real change cannot happen if this same power imbalance remains present in the museum framework.

In his exploration of discipline and punishment, Foucault acknowledged that “a penalty that had no end would be contradictory.”¹⁸ If a country’s only crime was being weaker than the colonial power, then it is now past time for this ‘cultural punishment’ to end. In fact, it would even be in the museum’s best interest. The tide is turning and these ‘punishments’ are beginning to work against the institution which is, in turn, being punished in the wake of social movements such as Black Lives Matter and ‘cancel culture’. It is pertinent that the museum begins to move to an “outward-looking, action-oriented approach to curation.”¹⁹ This is possible through a collaboration with the national bodies that hold stakes in these cultural heritage debates. As was seen through all three case-studies, their respective countries of origin went to great lengths to move beyond simply calling for repatriation and instead offered practical compromises and hybrid forms of joint exhibitions. Put simply, cultural institutions must begin to make the ‘post’ of ‘post-colonialism’ actually mean something. For, while this is a problematic term in that it pretends to move on from the past, it cannot be denied that it indicates some hope for the future. We need to make this hope a reality. Our society is one of surveillance and the truth is:

We are much less the Greeks than we believe. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.²⁰

The very fact that we subconsciously adhere to unspoken and covertly policed codes in spaces such as the museum demonstrates that this control is ingrained in our society and state institutions. The prison “normalised what has been deemed abnormal, acting as both an educating and moralising power”,²¹ but people are beginning to realise that we act as our own

¹⁷ Chaumier and Chare, 2020: 22.

¹⁸ Foucault, 2020: 107.

¹⁹ Hicks, 2020: 30.

²⁰ Foucault, 2020: 217.

²¹ Johnson, 2014: 6.

jail-keepers.²² Now is the time to make the ‘prison break’ and this can only be done through real discourse with the relevant stakeholders, which will dually provide “a point of resistance and a starting point.”²³ This vitally needs to be done because the truth of the matter is “decolonising museums isn’t part of a ‘culture war’. It’s about keeping them relevant.”²⁴ Museums have transformed themselves before, from private gentlemen’s clubs of the elite to free-access, public institutions. Who is to say it is not possible for them to change again?

²² Rivkin and Ryan, 2004: 549.

²³ Liljeblad, 2014/15: 11.

²⁴ Hicks, 2021.

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