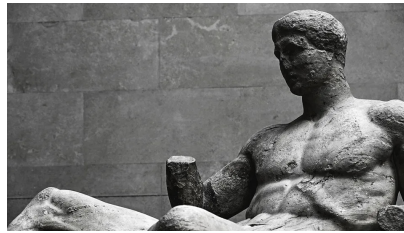


The restitution of cultural heritage will race ahead in 2025



Britain could end up losing its marbles

The Parthenon Marbles have not budged from the literal and figurative centre of the British Museum in London since they were purchased from Lord Elgin in 1816. The sculptures—about half of the marbles that survive from the temple in Athens—have also been at the centre of the world’s most famous dispute over cultural property since Greece formally demanded their return in 1983.

5 But in 2025, the marbles may finally be on the move—or, at least, negotiations about their status might take a big step forward. Many arguments against returning them have been toppled. The idea that the British Museum is the only competent custodian for the marbles has always seemed slightly spurious, even more so after one of its staff was accused of pilfering almost 2,000 antiquities and selling them on eBay. Just as powerful is a shift in public sentiment: a YouGov poll conducted in 2023 found that 49% of Britons were in favour of handing them
10 back, and just 15% believed they should remain.

The British Museum itself, and the government, also seem ready. A law from 1963 prohibits the museum from giving away its treasures, and the government is not likely to revise it. But both the museum’s chair, George Osborne, and its reform-minded new boss, Nicholas Cullinan, support a long-term loan of the marbles, perhaps borrowing other antiquities from Greece in return. The prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, has indicated that he
15 would not stand in the way.

Greece has publicly rejected anything less than full ownership, but a swap of some kind remains the most realistic outcome. That could offer a model for how the museum might manage the 99% of its stock that sits in storage. Dame Mary Beard, a trustee, has suggested the museum could become a “lending library” for the world. Loans would let it share its sometimes contested collection while burnishing its image. (In 2022 a
20 museum in Sicily loaned Greece a fragment of the marbles in exchange for another sculpture.)

A deal with Greece would also represent the crest of a wave of restitutions that have occurred in the marbles’ shadow. Museums are “less hamstrung” by politics on less high-profile items, notes Alexander Herman, the author of a book on the dispute. In the past few years, restitution has become a regular event.

Many items have gone back to Mediterranean countries from which they were taken, such as Italy and Turkey. Campaigners in Cambodia have also convinced the Metropolitan Museum in New York, among others, to return
25 stolen sculptures. In Africa, Nigeria has led the way, securing dozens of bronzes—looted by the British from the Kingdom of Benin in 1897—from German, American and some British institutions.

Objects are also beginning to flow back to Cameroon, Indonesia and Nepal. And Belgium recently gave the Democratic Republic of Congo a catalogue of 80,000 items in its African Museum, an apparent prelude to
30 returns. Bénédicte Savoy, a historian who has advised President Emmanuel Macron of France on the restitution of items to African countries, predicts that China, India and Vietnam will begin to make more vocal requests.

Legal action has helped drive restitution in America. In New York, the Manhattan district attorney’s Antiquities Trafficking Unit has wielded state law to return improperly exported objects. (Unusually, two museums in the Midwest and a private collector in Los Angeles are suing to block the unit’s seizures; court rulings may
35 curtail its authority outside New York state.) The 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act has resulted in the return of thousands of human remains to Native American tribes, though many are still in museums.

Most restitutions, however, will remain voluntary. Public awareness of the issue is growing both in the art-rich West and in the countries asking for objects back. There has also been a “generational shift” in leadership, notes
40 Dan Hicks, author of “The Brutish Museums”, a book on the repatriation debate. Due diligence on provenance

is now essential, and restitution is no longer a dirty word. Previous efforts have faltered. But, Mr Hicks says, the idea of the museum as “a prison cell, where objects go to die” is now itself a historical relic.

(692 words)

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