

Leaders

ROBERT JACKSON

Retain or return? It's complicated



Complex issues are raised by the French president Emmanuel Macron's talk of returning cultural goods in his country's public collections to their place of origin.

First, there are questions of legal title. In the UK, the ownership of items in state collections is normally vested in the museum's trustees, but they are subject to statutory restrictions on disposal. So too in other Western countries, including France. But where there are questions as to legal title, as in the case of Jewish-owned properties expropriated or sold under duress between 1933 and 1945, museums and governments must be open to legal challenge. Legislation has provided for this in the UK.

Second, there are questions of ethics. One set of issues concerns the circumstances in which particular items were originally obtained. The retention of items obtained by "looting" or as "spoils of war" must be ethically problematic.

Another set of issues concerns the category of "works of art" and even that of "cultural goods". Is an object of religious veneration or the skull of an ancestor sufficiently described as a "work of art" or even a "cultural good"? Another ethical consideration might refer to historical change in

the places of origin of such goods. What do ancient Near Eastern cultural remains have to do with predominantly Muslim cultures? In what sense is the Pergamon Altar "Turkish"? Do the Parthenon Marbles "belong" to modern Greece any more than they do to Hellenised Europe at large? It may be impossible to formulate ethical principles to cover all such issues in general terms, and it would seem that a case-by-case approach will always be necessary.

Third, there are questions that may be described as "prudential". There is no doubt that many fragile "cultural goods" owe their survival to their transfer to Western public collections. They may well be exposed to new hazards if they are returned to their place of origin: consider what might have happened in recent years to items returned to Iraq and Syria in the immediate post-colonial period. Will "cultural goods" returned from Western public collections remain in public ownership after they have been returned? Is there any comparably permanent guarantee of appropriate conservation arrangements? It may be politically incorrect to raise such questions, but the risks are real and they should be reckoned with.

Finally, there are questions of access. It has been argued that the presence of an item in a large Western collection

guarantees the possibility of intercultural comparison and the mutual enrichment of the understanding and appreciation of each such item. While this argument prompts the question of whether all such items should be regarded simply as "cultural goods", there is, however, no doubt that Western collections are much more widely accessible to visitors, to experts and, indeed, to pilgrims, than are most museums elsewhere. There is also a sense in which the great Western collections secure access for future audiences and their unanticipated questions: would the discovery of the common African origins of mankind have been possible if every skull and bone had been returned for interment with its ancestors before the discovery of DNA?

Trustees of museums and even parliamentarians are likely to be increasingly exposed to emotionally charged and high-volume calls for the return of cultural goods to their places of origin. Sometimes legal considerations will apply. There are serious ethical issues to be pondered. And at the same time, considerations of prudence, accessibility and preservation for the future must also be taken into account. There should, however, be no place for grandstanding and virtue-signalling.

• **Robert Jackson** is a former UK minister for higher education and science

JANE KALL

Egon not a



this year in Moscow, Paris, London, Liverpool, City, too, when the show (3 July-7 October) Thayer, the first to respond to the sexual harassment of Fine Arts saw the addressing the treatment of women in Schiele exhibition the contemporary was accused of sexual New York Times Schiele in its panelist-abusers. In the moment, it is an allegation of abuse according to its relationships with for us to judge, not living witnesses because present very different from in early 20th-century

The specific three aspects of his arrest for "public his treatment of in his life and the drawings. In each allegations are not

The so-called place when Schiele his model and lover in the rural town The "incident" was a teenage runaway couple to take her in Vienna. Once got cold feet, and to Neulengbach however, the teen charges of kidnapping rape, which led to thorough investigation the course of the charge was levelled he had committed "immorality" because hung out at his sex allegedly been exposed of art. Although it not survive, it may be the first two charges because they were actual circumstances however, stuck, sentenced to 24 had already been

By all appearances escapades were far the norm for a bourgeois. Because males were able marriage partners established them

DAN HICKS

The 'universal museum' is a 21st-century myth



In London and Berlin, the project of the "universal museum" is being reinvented. In the process, our assumptions about the provenance of this concept are being stretched to breaking point.

"The role of encyclopaedic museums in complex times of social change must be redefined," Neil MacGregor told a German newspaper last year in answer to mounting criticism of the Humboldt Forum as a neo-colonialist project. "There are no foreigners here. This is a world country, this museum," chimed the British Museum's Hartwig Fischer in an interview last month.

Both directors are expanding the idea of the "universal museum", which was the cornerstone of the 2002 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. Published by the directors of nine European and ten US art museums, the declaration famously argued against

the repatriation of cultural heritage on the grounds that such institutions "serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation". Subsequent debate has been framed as a clash between the preservation of Enlightenment values in conservative but worthy institutions and the promotion of contemporary political agendas and nationalistic attempts to rewrite history.

Now, a new slippage in language, from universal values to global reach, is taking place. But on closer inspection, how authentic are the concepts of the "universal" or "encyclopaedic" museum? These were virtually never employed until the later 20th century. Where these terms were coined, universality referred to the inclusion of either multiple disciplines or multiple forms of art. The idea of universality as global or cross-cultural scope would appear to be an artefact of the post-colonial period, as in the reference in a House of Lords debate about the Parthenon Marbles in 1983 to "the

function of maintaining and enhancing a great universal museum". Only in 2003 did the then arts minister Estelle Morris spell out to parliament the aim of a universal museum: "To hold for the benefit of humanity a collection representative of world cultures." Our idea of the universal museum was a 21st-century charter myth.

Today, as the rhetoric of universal values becomes a time-geography of every place and era, from Bloomsbury to the Museumsinsel, we witness mythography in the making. Behind the façade of Enlightenment values lie the contested legacies of European imperialism. Our national museums need an anthropological understanding of universality as a parochial Western concern now more than ever.

• **Dan Hicks** is the associate professor and curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, the University of Oxford, and a fellow of St Cross College, Oxford