

THE SOUL OF OBJECTS (I)

AFRICAN ART AND THE MUSEUM REPATRIATION DEBATE

“Why museum professionals need to talk about Black Panther”

Casey Haughin: <https://archive.is/agMp0>



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcN_InsZCKY

How do artefacts in museums get there?

Sources of museum acquisitions:

- ▶ **Gifts or donations:** Most of the museum collections are acquired through private donations
- ▶ **Museum purchases or loans:** Some artefacts are purchased by the museum at auction or borrowed from another institution
- ▶ **Excavations or partage:** Some museums also undertake archaeological excavations for artefacts and expand their collection through the system of partage



Workmen deliver a portion of the Parthenon frieze, the so called Elgin Marbles, to the British Museum in 1961. Greece has demanded the sculptures be returned to Athens.

Provenance: the history of the ownership of the artwork

- ▶ Could shed light on the historical, social and economic contexts of the object
- ▶ Information could include what museum collections it has been in, names of collectors, where it was purchased from etc.

Partage: (French for “sharing”) A system put in place during the early 20th century to divide up the excavated artefacts. Under *partage*, foreign led excavation teams provided the expertise and materials for the excavations and were allowed to divide the finds between themselves and the local government’s archaeological museums.



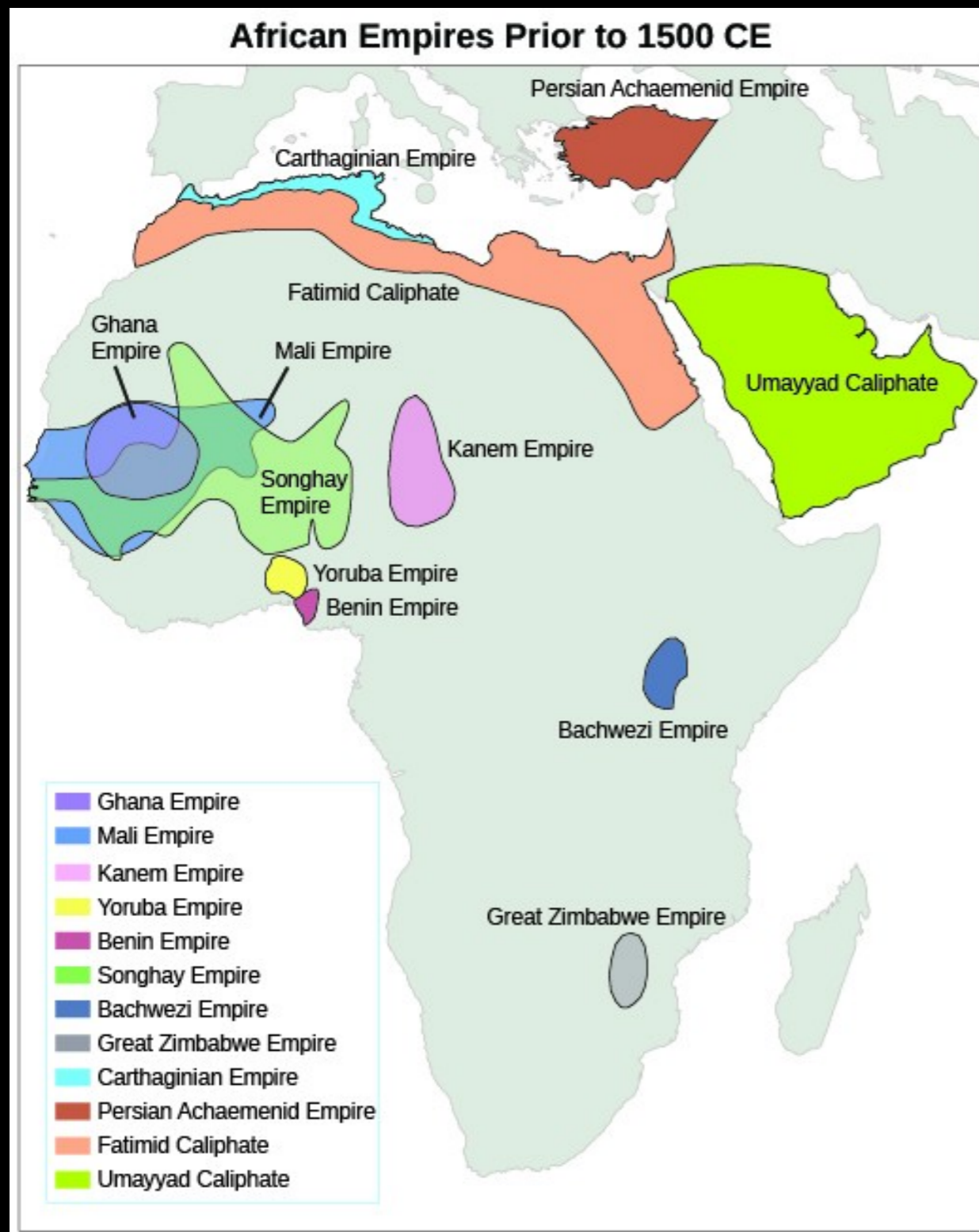
ARCHAEOLOGY AND PARTAGE

Many of the objects on view in this gallery came to the Museum through the system of *partage* (from the French *partager*, meaning “to share”), in which artifacts unearthed by foreign-led expeditions were divided between the excavators and the host or source country according to the local antiquities laws. Host countries have enacted such laws at different times. Egypt, for example, first restricted the export of antiquities without a permit in 1835, while the Ottoman Empire’s earliest antiquities law dates to 1869. In the 1920s and 30s, such laws were established by the British Mandates covering Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq, and by the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon. By the 1970s and 80s, changes in these laws largely ended the practice of *partage*. Foreign excavations continued, but they focused on gathering knowledge rather than artifacts. The discourse around *partage* continues today. Some see it as fair and advantageous for all, while others consider it a system based on colonialism and exploitation. The Met does not pursue the *partage* of finds in any of its current excavations.

Cover of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (right)

Wall label from the Ancient Near Eastern gallery at the Met Museum (left)

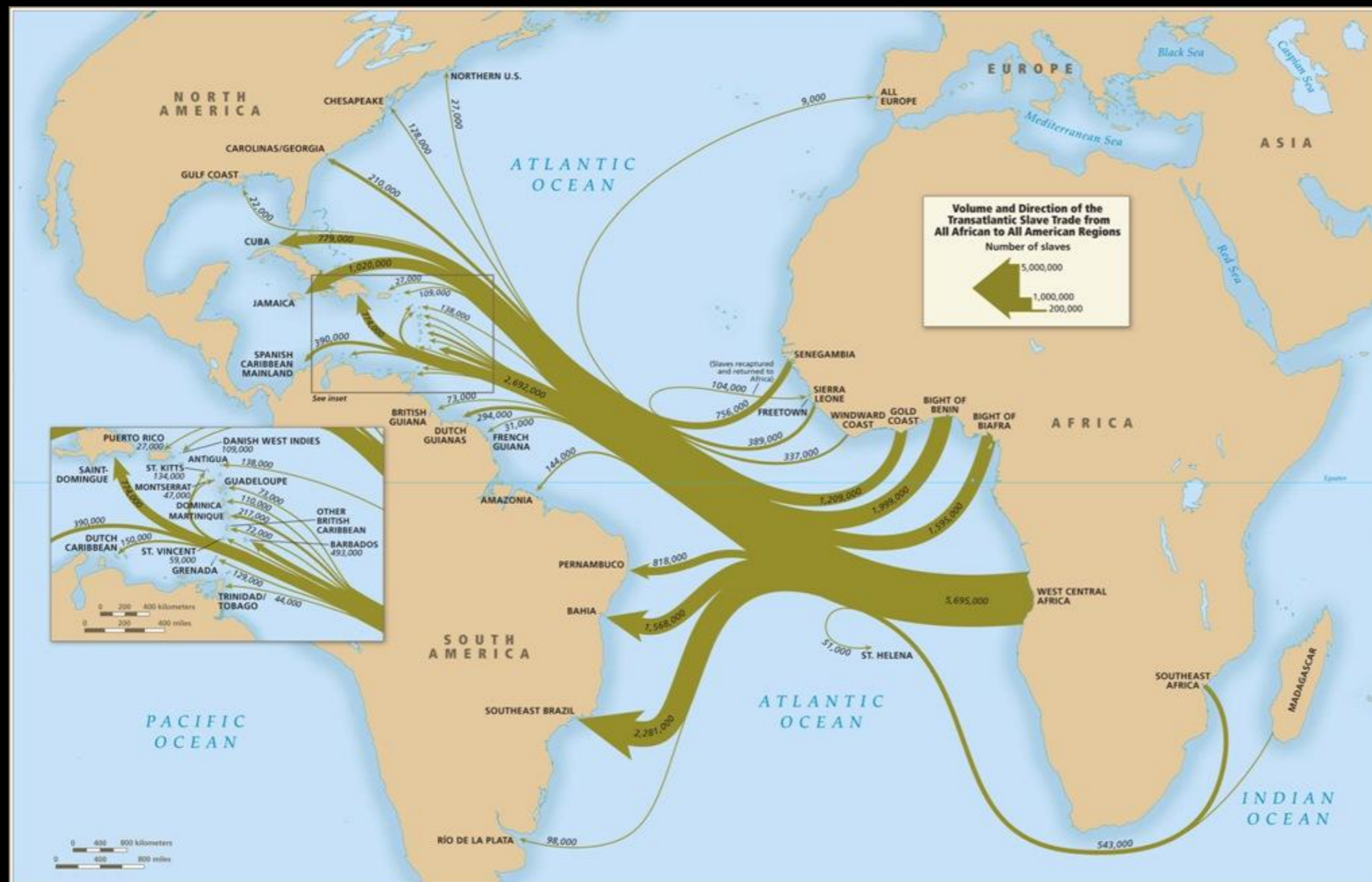
Africa pre 1500 CE



Map of African Empires pre 1500

European Encounters with Africa

- ▶ Trade between Europe and Africa develops in the 15th century
- ▶ Imported goods like cloth, iron, spices, jewellery and beads
- ▶ Eventually led to a more violent history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (millions of people from West Africa sent to the Americas) while ships would return with goods like sugar, coffee and cotton
- ▶ The slave trade ended in the 19th century but European imperialism continued to use African markets as a source of goods



Map of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The Scramble for Africa

- ▶ Today, Africa is comprised of 54 independent countries whose borders were drawn by Europeans at the Berlin conference in 1884-85 without a single African representative present
- ▶ By 1914, the entire continent with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia was colonized by European nations.
- ▶ Resistance to colonial rule grew steadily and between 1950 and 1980, 47 nations achieved independence



Map of Colonial powers in Africa

Collecting African art

Kunstkammer or Wunderkammer (Cabinet of Curiosity):

Rooms that stored and exhibited a wide variety of objects and artifacts from distant cultures

The artist, culture, and function of these objects was not usually recorded or regarded as significant.



Domenico Remps
Cabinet of Curiosities
c. 1690



Ferrante Imperato
Dell'Historia Naturale
(the earliest illustration of a natural history cabinet)
1599



Art on display at the Royal Museum of Central Africa, Belgium, c. 1901

AFRO-PORTUGUESE IVORY



Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba)
16th century
Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria
ivory, iron, copper
(The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

AFRO-PORTUGUESE IVORY



Saltcellar: Portuguese Figures
ca. 1525-1600
Edo peoples (Bini-Portuguese)

- ▶ Believed ivory to be the symbol of purity (color white)
- ▶ Ivory as a material is important: believed to be a source of wealth because they brought Portuguese traders to Africa
- ▶ As Portuguese wealth was increasing, there was a demand for luxury goods like these ivory figurines.
- ▶ They would commission African craftsmen to create specific pieces: amalgamation of European design and African skill
- ▶ They have been described as emerging from a period that predates power imbalances and racist imagery. Therefore the shared African and Portuguese aesthetic that they reflect is one that was achieved through the negotiation of equals.



Lidded Saltcellar
Sierra Leone, Sapi-Portugese
15th-16th century
ivory



Carved ivory salt-cellar, in three parts
Nigeria
Ivory
c. 1525-1600

THE BENIN BRONZES



Benin Plaque: the Oba with Europeans
16th century
The British Museum



Benin Plaque: the Oba in regalia with
symbols of royal power
16th-17th century
The British Museum



Ancestral shrine at the Royal Palace, Benin City
1891 (earliest known photograph of Oba's
compound)



The newly crowned Oba, 2016

How did so many of these bronze sculptures end up in European museums?



Interior of the Benin king's palace in 1897 after the raid by British looters



British soldiers with objects looted from the royal palace during the military expedition to Benin City in 1897.
Source: The British Museum

The question of repatriation today



In London, Black Lives Matter demonstrations have highlighted the connection between institutions such as the British Museum and colonial-era looting in Africa.

Protesters in [#Paris](#)' Musée du Quai [#Branly](#) were demanding the museum to give back its artefacts to their countries of origin today. Des manifestants demandaient au Musée du Quai Branly de rendre ses artefacts à leurs pays d'origine aujourd'hui.



The Restitution Debate

Repatriation: The return of artefacts to their country of origin

Restitution: The return of artefacts to an individual or community

Easter Island governor begs British Museum to return Moai: 'You have our soul'

The museum has held one of the most spiritually important statues of the Chilean island's stone monoliths for 150 years

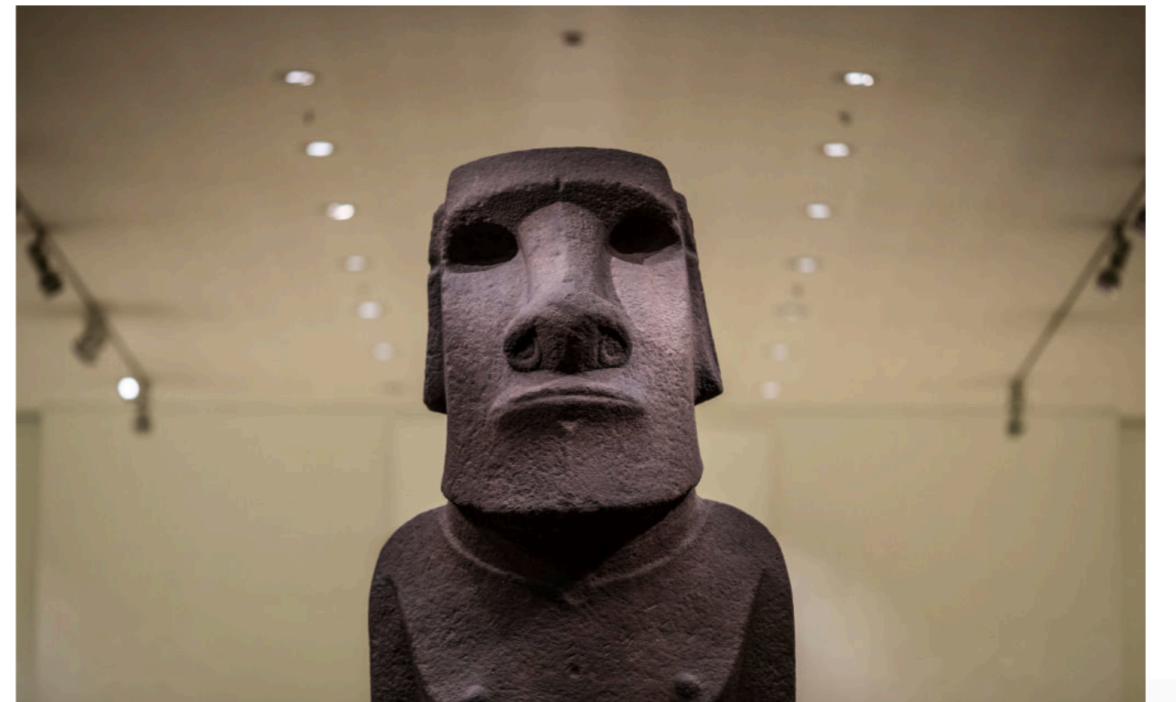


<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/20/easter-island-british-museum-return-moai-statue>

Easter Island's Mayor Says a Monumental Moai Sculpture Is Better Off in the British Museum

Support for the British Museum coincides with an activist-led tour of "stolen art" that included the sculpture Hoa Hakananai'a.

Kate Brown, December 11, 2018



<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/easter-island-mayor-moai-1416328>

Islamic State Destruction Renews Debate Over Repatriation of Antiquities

To the Editor:

The recent attacks on the ancient cities of Nimrud and Hatra in Iraq underscore a tragic reality. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [encourages](#) — and provides an institutional instrument for — the retention of antiquities within the borders of the modern state that claims them. That state, very sadly, also has the authority to sell them on the illegal market, damage them or destroy them.

Until Unesco changes its basic position on this issue, antiquities will remain at risk. The world can only be grateful for the earlier regime of “partage,” which allowed for the sharing of Assyrian antiquities with museums worldwide that could preserve them.

This unconscionable destruction is an argument for why portable works of art should be distributed throughout the world and not concentrated in one place. ISIS will destroy everything in its path.

JAMES CUNO

President and Chief Executive

The J. Paul Getty Trust

Los Angeles



In defence of museums

“The Museum is a **unique resource** for the world: the breadth and depth of its collection allow a **global public** to examine cultural identities and explore the complex network of interconnected human cultures.”

-Press statement by the British Museum

“Museums have a **global responsibility** to better understand their collections, to more fully uncover the histories and the stories behind their objects, and to reveal the people and societies that shaped their journeys.

To this end, we want to better reflect on the history of these artefacts in our collection - tracing their origins and then confronting the difficult and complex issues which arise.”

-Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Encyclopaedic museum: A museum with collections of art and other cultural items from around the world, not just from the nation where they are located.

So what is the solution?

- ▶ How can museum displays acknowledge the histories of provenance?
- ▶ How do we go about the process of repatriation when provenance cannot be traced or determine the "owner"?
- ▶ How do we address the destruction of antiquities or lack of resources for conservation?
- ▶ Who should have access to these objects? (question of museums as spaces for the global public)



GLOSSARY

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