
Rosetta

Bealby, M. S.; Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis (eds.); *Museums and Resitution: New Practices, New Approaches*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2014

Rosetta **17**: 132 – 136

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue17/bealby.pdf>

Review: Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis (eds). *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. Pp. 204. Includes 17 black and white illustrations. £54.00. ISBN: 978-1-4094-3563-1 (Hbk).

Marsia Sfakianou Bealby
(*University of Birmingham and University of the People*)

If museums belong to humanity, then to whom belong museum objects? If removed from their context and kept away from home, should museum objects be returned to their country of origin or lineal descendants; and if so, how?

The book under review is a compilation of papers discussing restitution in museums; a topic that generates vigorous discussions in the Twenty-First century. Indeed, the edition of Tythacott and Arvanitis addresses the subject at a global level, demonstrating that restitution is high on the agenda in the changing role of modern museums. The reviewer will refer to some notable discussions in this book.

The publication is divided into three parts, with part I providing an overview of the topic, part II listing case-studies from across the world, and part III reflecting on the return, or possible return of museum objects.

In chapter 1, which acts as an introduction, Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis comment on how extensively restitution is presented in politics and international law, with museums operating as political instruments. As a result, in academia the issue is often neglected from the viewpoint of museums. Therefore, the book's objective is to discuss how museums, and specifically museum staff, address the subject.

Chapter 1 also underlines the difference between restitution, repatriation and reunification (see below). A historical background of the topic is provided, explaining for instance how Greek, Italian and Turkish antiquities reached western museums in

the 19th century, and what consequences (negative and positive) this practice had on academic research. An overview of the relevant legislation on restitution is also supplied. In the reviewer's opinion, the definition of terms, historical background and particularly the mention of legislation, are all incredibly handy, especially for readers who are not familiar with the topic.

In a contribution that hooks the reader's attention, Tristram Besterman (part I, chapter 2) expresses his thoughts on restitution and the multiple forms this takes in museums. Besterman comments on how political restitution is, and contemplates how ethical modern western museums are when exhibiting items that are products of '*ill-considered acquisition*' (page 23). He states that museum staff bear great responsibility in restitution claims, but museums should co-operate with communities on this matter. Besterman's paper is not a monologue. On the contrary, it invites and prepares the reader to take sides in the case-studies presented in the following papers (parts II and III).

Piotr Bienkowski (chapter 3) focusses on the value, legitimacy; and also authority and ownership of heritage objects. Firstly, he points out that the utilitarian, and particularly social value of heritage objects is in the eye of the beholder. By (re-)addressing value, this chapter paves the way for the understanding of case-studies such as the 'Skulls of Urk', which were bound with religious significance in the Urkish culture (see below, van der Maas). Moreover, Bienkowski emphasises that it is necessary to establish which people/groups placing restitution claims are the legitimate right-holders of heritage objects. Lastly, he considers how complex ownership and authority over heritage objects is when it comes to matters of restitution. To support his argument, he refers to the Rosetta stone. If the Egyptians requested the Rosetta Stone as a loan in order to exhibit it in their country, automatically, they would legitimise the British Museum's ownership over the artefact. Bienkowski closes his paper with the visualisation of museums as '*loci of deliberative democracy*' (page 47), with all parties involved in the decision-making process of restitution claims. Whether this visualisation is possible, with equal participation for all sides, is for the reader to decide.

In part II, Neil Curtis (chapter 6) discusses how Scottish museums should handle repatriation of human remains, while he also acknowledges the legislation supporting this process. The chapter is accompanied by a very useful table, listing recorded repatriation requests to Scottish museums (1990-2010). Naturally, human remains are a very sensitive issue in matters of repatriation, as they belong to actual human beings, i.e. they are not artefacts and their exhibition is legislatively complex – even controversial, to say the least. Nonetheless, items closely associated with human remains should also receive special significance when restitution is considered. As an example, Curtis mentions the story of the Ghost Dance Shirt which was collected from a deceased Sioux (Native American) warrior after the Massacre of Wounded Knee (1890). Initially in Glasgow Museum, the relic was later returned to the Lakota People (1998). With this, and other examples of restitution, Curtis concludes that Scottish museums should handle every repatriation request individually, especially when legislation is put on the table. Curtis succeeds in promoting critical thinking about the restitution of human remains, a topic that is also approached by other authors in this book (see below).

In chapter 7, Helen A. Robbins investigates the effectiveness of NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) in restitution. NAGPRA legislation passed in 1990, and its role is to assist in the repatriation of certain Native American human remains and cultural items to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated tribes. After discussing how Native American items were acquired by museums and private collectors, Robbins lists some of the challenges in the implementation of this legislation. For instance, she states that the complexity of NAGPRA often hinders the process of repatriation. However, the author finally argues that NAGPRA, overall can be seen as a success, ‘a *catalyst for positive change within museums*’ (page 114), creating unanticipated opportunities for both tribes and museums.

Demelza van der Maas (part III, chapter 9) also deals with human remains in her work, adding to the contribution of Curtis. Van der Maas associates the exhibition and repatriation of human remains with the movement of the so-called ‘return to things’,

which was embraced by the humanities and human sciences in the late nineties. As a result of this movement, the notion of identity and the human body itself – within and beyond museums – is objectified. To support her view, the author discusses the restitution story of the Skulls of Urk, which ended in 2010 with the return of the skulls from the University Museum of Utrecht to the people of Urk.

The thought-provoking contribution of Kalliopi Fouseki (chapter 11) examines the case-study of the so-called 'Parthenon Marbles'. The debate over these architectural sculptures is currently more heated than ever, with the 'Marbles' creating a storm of controversy; thus, some of the readers may find this chapter provocative. In this paper, the author presents the results of a small-scale survey that she conducted in Athens (Summer 2010). The survey aimed at investigating what significance these sculptures have for the Greeks, and evaluate the view of the Greek public over the claim for the restitution of these sculptures from the British Museum to Greece. The results showed that the Greek public sees the request for the return of the 'Marbles' as a matter of repatriation. Here, the term 'repatriation' is emotionally grounded in the sense of '*topos*'= place: to the majority of Greeks who participated in the survey, the sculptures should be returned to Greece because Greece is their legitimate *topos*. The results also showed that the repatriation of the 'Marbles' is also seen as a matter of heritage identity and social justice. To Fouseki, repatriation prevails by far over 'reunification', i.e. the reunification of the sculptures with their original topographical context. Reunification is the official discourse and is academically led, whereas repatriation portrays public opinion. Fouseki ends her paper with a very prominent question. If the doctrine of academics and governmental authorities disagrees with the viewpoint of the Greek public, then '*who is claiming the Parthenon Marbles and on behalf of whom*'? (page 175).

With regards to structure and layout, the book is clear and coherent. The black and white images are of high-quality. The text reads nicely and the discussions engage the reader's attention. All papers are well-written and fully referenced, and a list of up-to-date sources accompanies every chapter. The book is mainly aimed at museum professionals and academics, although students and anyone else interested in the

topic would find it easy to follow.

All chapters reflect current national and international debate in the field. It is unfortunate that the book lacks a discussion of the ways in which digital technology could shape the future of restitution in museums. Otherwise, the papers are insightful and informative and, notably, presented case studies are examined without bias. All contributions highlight the key role that museums and communities play in matters of restitution, inviting the reader to ponder over the issue of ownership of museum objects. Thus, the objective of the book is met, and, to the reviewer's mind, this publication is a major contribution to the field of museum studies.