Saved or stolen?

A

‘Telling history through things is what museums are all about,’ explains Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum.

He should know, as the museum is one of the oldest and largest in the world. It also has a well-earned reputation as an ‘encyclopaedic’ museum, with a global story told through eight million objects. Inside, a wide-ranging collection includes everything from prehistoric pottery to precious hand made jewellery from India and Ming dynasty vases from China. The museum helps us to understand how events that happened at different times and in different places were connected, and how they influenced each other. Indeed, this was the vision of its founder, Sir Hans Sloane, who tried setting up cross-cultural comparisons in his original collection in 1753.
As you walk around the British Museum today, it’s clear that Sloane’s broad-minded vision is very much alive and well. What’s less clear is how the museum acquired many of the objects on display and whether they should remain there. Some have a well-documented history, but others were added during Britain’s colonial period, so it’s possible they were stolen from famous archaeological sites or acquired as trophies of war. Imagine having an important national monument from your country kept permanently in another country. How would you feel? Would you try to get the country to return it? It’s not surprising that many countries have gone on to ask for their treasures back. However, where they should be kept is a question that is still fiercely debated.

The Rosetta Stone is a well-known exhibit that illustrates this problem. Carved in 196 BC, the stone shows a pharaoh’s decree in ancient hieroglyphics, Demotic and classical Greek, and was the key to unlocking the language of the ancient Egyptians. It was first discovered in 1799 near the town of el-Rashid (Rosetta) by soldiers in Napoleon’s army, but on Napoleon’s defeat in 1801, it became the property of the British. Many of the museum’s treasures were acquired in a similar way, but unsurprisingly, the British Museum is reluctant to let the Rosetta Stone go. It argues that more people see the Stone in London than they would in Cairo, the location is more secure and the exhibit is a critical part of its global collection. The Egyptian government has other ideas and is trying to persuade the museum to return it. They claim that it’s important for their nation’s history and identity, and that many Egyptians can’t afford to go to London to see it. But the British museum won’t let the Rosetta Stone go, even as a loan, as they fear it won’t be returned.
D

The Elgin Marbles is another famous and controversial exhibit. Taken from the Parthenon temple in 1802 by Lord Elgin, the sculptures are considered a crucial part of Greek history – so much so that the Greek government, supported by UNESCO, has repeatedly asked for the marbles to be returned. According to the Greeks, Lord Elgin ‘looted’ the sculptures as well as seriously damaging the monument; however, the British claim that Elgin had the permission of the Ottoman authorities to remove them. It wasn’t until 1822 during the Greek War of Independence that the Acropolis was handed over to the Greeks, but by then the English Parliament had approved Elgin’s acquisition. No one can make the museum give back the marbles; however, the Greek government will go on campaigning for their return until they are back in Athens.

E

The British Museum is a place dedicated to international understanding, and the advantages of an encyclopaedic museum are clear to see: ‘We need to explore common ground, how people perceive their relationship to each other ... and (to) see human history as an ongoing joint project,’ explains MacGregor. But this attempt to bring different cultures together has been self-defeating, ultimately having the opposite effect: taking treasures from other countries has resulted in never-ending international rows. So as you admire the breathtaking objects on display at the museum, think about their legacy. Remember to ask yourself: Does the end justify the means? Is taking an object for a museum that different from theft? And shouldn’t important objects be exhibited where they were originally made?