David Gill reviews

Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended up in Museums … And Why They Should Stay There
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
Tiffany Jenkins

Museums are a valuable and valued part of the civic and national landscape:

They continue to matter to society as James Cuno (Cuno 2011) has attempted to assert (and see Gill 2012b). Jenkins has written here about repatriation: But its thrust is not one that is expected. This is not just a debate about the return of archaeological material that has been derived from recent looting (e.g. Watson and Todeschini 2006; Silver 2009; Felch and Frammolino 2011), or the return of long-standing acquisitions (e.g. St. Clair 1983), but it extends to the repatriation of human remains.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part I consists of four chapters: Great Explorers and Curious Collectors; The Birth of the Public Museum; Antiquity Fever; and Cases of Loot. Jenkins launches her voyage of discovery with Captain James Cook, and reminds us of the scientific nature of his voyage. She then turns to the creation of the major national museums: The British Museum and the Louvre. The section on "The Improving Museum" (pp. 62-63) could have usefully reflected on the development of the Chelmsford Museum that opened in July 1843 and the vision of John Disney, chair of the Chelmsford Philosophical Society, who is better known as the benefactor of the "Museum Disneianum" to the University of Cambridge (Gill 2004; Vout 2012). The desire to acquire objects from the past ranges from Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (and the discovery of the Rosetta Stone: Moser 2006), to the discovery of Nineveh by Layard (see Adkins 2003). Looting starts with the activities of Verres in Republican Sicily (Miles 2008), to the events of the present conflict in Syria and northern Iraq (see Gill 2015). Jenkins could have looked to earlier examples such as the looting of Middle Kingdom tombs in Egypt and the redistribution of the contents from Crete to the Sudan (Gill and Padgham 2005).

Part II consists of five chapters: Museum Wars; Who Owns Culture?; The Rise of Identity Museums; Atonement: Making Amends for Past Wrongs; and Burying Knowledge: The Fate of Human Remains. These chapters build on the thoughts of James Cuno in his series of studies on the role of the museum in the contemporary world (Cuno 2004; Cuno 2008; Cuno 2009; Cuno 2011; but see Gill 2009a; Gill 2009b; Gill 2012b), supported by the underpinning of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (Appiah 2006).

The book title and cover image allude to and reference the architectural sculptures from the Parthenon at Athens. For Jenkins, "The placement of the Elgin Marbles in London, situated in the context of a museum with objects from all over the world, may not go so far as to improve international relations, but it does assist our understanding of how cultures have shaped each other" (p. 245). It is true that the British Museum is a major visitor attraction: 6.8 million visitors in 2015. In contrast, the Athenian acropolis received just over 2 million visitors in 2015, and the Acropolis Museum 1.5 million visitors. Yet the display and care of the sculptures in London has not been without controversy, given the damage sustained during cleaning during the inter-war period (Jenkins 2001). The display of these Athenian sculptures in a purpose-built museum adjacent to and within line of sight of the physical remains of the fifth century BC temple that now forms part of the UNESCO World Heritage site is more appropriate than in an encyclopedic museum in Bloomsbury. The viewer would be able to reconnect the sculptures with the building for which they had been designed.

The Parthenon marbles are not the only architectural sculptures in exile (see Jenkins 1992). The Aegina pediments in Munich, or the Bassai frieze in the British Museum do not feature in Jenkins' study. Where is the detailed discussion of the Great Altar of Zeus excavated at Pergamon in north-west Turkey and displayed in a museum in Berlin (Marchand 1996)? The architectural and freestanding sculptures associated with the Mausoleum at Halikarnassos, one of the wonders of the ancient world, and now in the British Museum receive a mere passing mention (p. 207).

The bronze Benin plaques that are distributed through museums around the world are in part the result of spoils from the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897. They form one of the case studies for Jenkins (pp. 138-42). Yet Jenkins appears to be delicately provocative when she writes, "The glory of Benin was built on the slave trade: the contested Benin Bronzes were crafted from manilas, brought by European traders, traded for slaves, and melted down" (p. 287). Is this statement intended as justification for retaining these items?

Central to any discussion of repatriation would be the approximately 350 items returned to Italy from public and private collections in North America. Jenkins mentions returns from the J. Paul Getty Museum, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (p. 156), but could have expanded the list to mention the Cleveland Museum of Art, Fordham University, Princeton University Art Museum, Toledo Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the University of Virginia Art Museum in Charlottesville (Gill and Chippindale 2006; Gill and Chippindale 2007). The roots of the questioning of some of this material started with a wider Cambridge-based research project on the material and intellectual consequences of acquiring classical antiquities (Gill and Chippindale 1993; Chippindale and Gill 2000; Chippindale et al. 2001). It would also have been worthwhile to explore why such toxic acquisitions were not made by institutions such as the British Museum. How do the curatorial cultures differ between the countries?

Jenkins mentions in passing the Dallas Museum of Art and the return of the Orpheus mosaic to Turkey (p. 206). She does so in the same paragraph as the return of the Lydian Treasure from New York's Metropolitan Museum Art (Bothmer 1984, Özgen and Öztürk 1996), and the extended negotiations for the return of the Weary Herakles from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (and formerly in the Shelby White and Leon Levy collection) (Bothmer 1990). And yet the cases are very different. The Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) voluntarily returned some items in the wake of the Almagià scandal that rocked several institutions especially the Princeton University Art Museum (Gill 2012a; Gill 2013a). Maxwell Anderson, the Director of DMA, has long been an advocated of the ethical acquisition of antiquities and expressed through the EUMILOP loan exhibition program (Anderson and Nista 1989, Wescoat and Anderson 1989; see also Butcher and Gill 1990; Anderson 2017). This agreement could be seen, not as political correctness, but an attempt to be acting in a way that has been informed by the professional principles of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD).

Yet this case study is very different. Jenkins claims, "Today, museum directors take care to demonstrate that this behavior is no longer acceptable" (p. 156). Has the situation changed in reality? The position of the Cleveland Museum of Art and its acquisition, and subsequent publication, of the bronze Apollo ("The Leutwitz Apollo") appears to have been intended to challenge those who question the ethics of the acquiring recently surfaced archaeological material (Bennett 2013; Gill 2013b). Even more telling was the acquisition by Cleveland in 2012 of the portrait head of Drusus Minor that a mere five years later had to be returned to Italy after it was realized that it had been removed from an archaeological store (Gill 2017). Equally telling were the emails circulating within the St Louis Art Museum that related to the acquisition of the Egyptian mummy mask and suggested more than a lack of transparency (Gill 2014). And revelations about acquisitions (such as the Minoan larnax) by the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University have not brought about appropriate investigations within an appropriate time frame (Gill 2010, 73).

The third main theme of Jenkins' volume is on the repatriation of human remains. She alludes to the popular exhibition of the scientific study of Egyptian mummies at the British Museum. This reviewer recalls the long discussions about the display of human remains in "The Face of Egypt" exhibition at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea (Lloyd and Gill 1996). The exhibition of royal Scythian burials at the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, had as its centerpiece the display of tattoos on human remains (Menghin and Nawroth 2007).

Jenkins applies her discourse to the contemporary situation and introduces the United Kingdom's (belated) intention to sign up to The Hague Convention in the light of the widespread destruction of archaeological remains in Syria and northern Iraq (p. 152). The universal condemnation of intentional destruction at the UNESCO World Heritage Site at Palmyra in Syria (as well as the killing of archaeologist Khaled el-Asaad in August 2015) has helped to motivate UK politicians. Yet it should be pointed out that the legislation, The Cultural Property (Armed Conflict) Act (2017), is unlikely to cover the cultural remains of Syria precisely because the groups causing the damage have not signed up to the Convention.

Jenkins concludes that museums should retain their cultural property and human remains, and that their curatorial teams and trustees should reject any calls for returns. At times in the volume Jenkins seems to ignore cultural sensitivities: her discussion of human remains and funerary material relating to Native Americans makes for some uncomfortable reading. She has failed to engage with the criminal aspects of recent cases of looting that have led to the acquisition of major works for encyclopedic museums. Yet more could have been made of the benefits of partage (a theme explored by James Cuno) that have allowed the distribution of finds around the world (e.g. Gill 1990; Gill 2005). The 2003 looting of the National Museum in Baghdad was shocking (pp. 153-54), but the location of excavated finds elsewhere, such as in the British Museum, lessened the potential impact on science.

Inanimate marbles are very different to organic remains of our human family. Museum curators, archaeologists, and all those who care about culture as well as cultural property deserved a more carefully nuanced discussion of the issues.

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