

Whose heritage? Museums and identities..

My personal view is that this is closely linked to the location of the museum vs the original location of its contents, and/or the original owners of those contents. But whichever it is, it always relates to the ruling/moneyed classes of the location, past and present.

The collections in many major museums relate to the history of the location / country and contain relics of the past, accompanied by the narrative of their origins. The heritage of the region - the story that country tells itself about its past. Monumental and personal - the relics are mostly those owned by and created for the ruling classes. They speak of conquest, empire, power, hierarchy and nation.

But many of these major museums, particularly in Europe and the UK, the countries which had empires, also hold the heritage of those countries they predated upon. By 'right' of conquest, greed, arrogance, and racism. Sometimes this was to save the items from a resident culture that did not value them, but mostly it was because they could. An interest in history and a load of money, along with the backing of an empire and its attitude to the rest of the world, and they believed they had the right to anything they wanted. Even now money speaks in the world of antiquities and the rich and selfish of our time can still acquire the trappings of the rich and selfish of the past. It is acquisitive ego, whether national or personal.

And so the countries of empire have museums full of the history of other countries, those they plundered in the past. And they still believe in their entitlement. And that is their real heritage - that of theft and plunder and the greed of empire - this is the unspoken narrative behind all the pretty, educational words on display, with the carefully selected items the public is allowed to see..

And they demonstrate, also, their lack of common humanity in not only having brought back monumental architecture and treasures, but the remains of people they believed to be inferior (people they killed..) - as specimens to be studied, like animals, which they also treated as having little or no value beyond use or abuse. This is the heritage of conquest. Benign it is not.