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Museums, Heritage, and Representation

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In the light of one of your visits, examine the elements for and against removing monuments/artifacts or buildings from their sites in the landscape to the safekeeping of the museum.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the development of disciplines focusing on the past, the prospect of acquiring heritage pieces – whether that be artifacts, buildings, or even human and non-human animal remains – to study and safekeep them has been widely treated as an integral part of the museum curation process (O’Keefe 1993). The past few decades, however, have witnessed a shift towards accountability and debates on the ethics behind this expectation have even brought about serious discussions on physical repatriation for artifacts that were unethically obtained in the past (Kramer 2004). For places such as the British Museum, who have amassed huge collections of heritage pieces from all over the world, repatriation would be a difficult task and would probably be extremely costly considering its status and appeal as a tourist destination. Other places, such as in the North America, have been working with Indigenous peoples as of recent to return important cultural artifacts since a vast majority of North American Heritage revolves entirely around Indigenous peoples (Kramer 2004).

The prospect of removing pieces from their original location and bringing them into a museum setting for ‘safekeeping’ is difficult to properly address, not only because of potential ethical dilemmas, but because it demands attention to be placed on what that would mean for artifacts already in circulation, and if this would effectively put an end to contemporary museums as we see them today. This begs the question: if those involved in this situation are already working on returning heritage pieces, is it wise to continue taking more? Of course, the communities and cultures that are arguing for ownership of their heritage back need to be at the center of this conversation since they were the ones wronged in the first place.

Over the course of this essay, I will critically explore arguments for and against removing heritage pieces from their original location to that of a museum, placing focus on where I believe

the arguments are strongest and highlighting the complexities and contemporary issues that this debate brings to light. I will be looking specifically at St. Fagans, as well as pulling in other examples I find relevant, including my own experiences and perspective as someone who grew up in southern California where heritage and open-air museums are relatively uncommon, in order to provide a more fluid and nuanced depiction of this topic.

ST. FAGANS MUSEUM VISIT

While there are different techniques for curating exhibitions, most museums today follow a pragmatist approach, which can be recognized in its special emphasis on “entertainment and education,” catering entirely to the visitor (Bernbeck 2000, 116). This approach stands in opposition to the purist approach, which holds a “critical attitude” towards “the institution of the museum itself,” placing stress on the autonomy of the object being studied and questioning how its context has changed as it has been moved (Bernbeck 2000, 117). While both methods have their uses, prioritizing the visitor and making it entertaining, accessible, and educational has become somewhat of a standard today. Open air museums like St. Fagans, therefore, are a prime example of this contemporary type of new museology (Bernbeck 2000). St. Fagans has an exciting combination of Welsh heritage buildings that are available for visit, such as old farms, mills, chapels, and houses. Experiencing St. Fagans for the first time, as someone not from Wales, is reminiscent of going to an amusement park or a renaissance fair; It is incredibly interesting and enjoyable, yet trivial at times in its status as an educational or academic resource.

St. Fagans is considered a national museum as well, implying that part of its goal is to provide an authentic representation of Welsh heritage and culture. In this aspect, the museum can be given significant credibility, especially when holding community markets and events. Naturally, the museum’s efforts to capitalize off of Welsh culture and heritage through markets and gift shops is less than ideal, especially when considering what role the museum may play in public perception of Welsh life. Mason (2007) remarks specifically about how “national cultures are defined and shaped by national museums,” and how St. Fagans in particular places an “overemphasis on the rural nature of Welsh life than is accurate” (Haelsy 2008, 624).

When artifacts, and especially buildings, are taken from their original location, and consequently taken away from their original contextual purpose and cultural history, is the authenticity of said heritage piece lessened when presented in a museum? Is the habit of

collecting and placing special importance on the past as well as the ‘other’ due in part to a western, and primarily white, imperialist mindset that has evolved with western capitalistic materiality and individualism (See Pearce 1995, Zimmermann 1998 for more on this topic)? And if so, is there a focus on a lost sense of nostalgia for a forgotten Welsh past and history that was stolen by the same imperial mindset that runs the contemporary museums today? Reflecting on my visit brought about these questions which I believe to be relevant to the wider discussion on removing heritage pieces and bringing them into a museum, and despite not having clear answers for them, I believe them to be beneficial to the overall discussion.

FOR

The most prominent argument that agrees with taking and presenting artifacts and old buildings in a museum addresses the issue with preservation. Time naturally erodes heritage and thus alters our understanding of history, transforming archeologists into pseudo protectors of the past and museum curators as the lens through which the public perceive the past. O’Keefe (1993) claims “any evidence that can throw light on the past of humanity [as] important,” and that the “ultimate beneficiary of archaeological research” has to do with the “dissemination of knowledge... thus creating a sense of wonder, of identity and continuity” (O’Keefe 1993, 411). Additionally, Isler-Kerényi (1994) takes this a step further by affirming that the excavation and curation process “help[s] with the protection of archeologically and environmentally sensitive landscapes” (Isler-Kerényi 1994, 352).

Of course, without any of this, our knowledge of the past would be severely limited, particularly to those not in the academic field studying the past. Museums today serve as educational opportunities for the everyday person through activities like field trips for school kids or culture-based community building events; St. Fagans does this with occasional markets and Welsh culture events. By creating successful tourist destinations, museums bring more people in to visit, and likely spend money, generating economic advantages for local communities as well. From the perspective of the visitor, contemporary museums are certainly appealing and hold little downside. Because of excavation projects and ever-changing nature of museum exhibits, people today are given the opportunity to connect to a distant past, whether that be for nostalgia or curiosity.

It is also worth highlighting that while past methods of acquiring such heritage pieces have been unethical, most artifacts today are obtained through legal means while abiding by the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Property, which was held specifically to put measures in place that would prevent illicit trade of cultural heritage (UNESCO n/d). Additionally, there may be some credence to the assertion that without this convoluted past, we may not have access to such amazing tokens of global cultural history at our fingertips as they likely could have been covered up by time or repurposed. However, this attitude is also held by some in the discussion for repatriation, in which many historians are unwilling to part with cultural heritage pieces today because they believe them to be in better hands now than if they were to return them to unstable environments, despite not having any cultural claim to the artifacts.

AGAINST

Those who argue against taking heritage pieces and presenting them in museums primarily place a focus on ownership and cultural property; The fact remains that many artifacts and even buildings which have been relocated to museums do not belong to the people who have taken them. Needless to say, the question of what constitutes ownership over these items, especially concerning ones that have been in the museum's possession for considerable periods of time, and in a time of growing globalization and diversity, is still debated over (Zimmermann 1998). In reflecting on tensions in North America regarding physical repatriation, Zimmermann (1998) considers the possibility of rising tensions as partially due to a disconnect between western ideologies and Indigenous peoples in how they conceptualize property as well as how they preserve the past. Mukerji (1997) furthers this line of thought by maintaining that the habit of collecting in and of itself is both a "symptom and source of western culture," serving to uphold materialistic expectations on individualism and history (Karp & Lavine 1991; Mukerji 1997, 521). This divide between the historians and the cultures they are representing in museums will inevitably affect how these items are interpreted and displayed because the culture, the curator, and the audience are not in sync, lessening the authenticity by even slightly misinterpreting its context. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to discuss the ethical dilemma of taking more heritage pieces today without first addressing what has already been unethically sourced. Moving forward would be senseless in the absence of accountability. Reworking the western view of ownership in order to effectively give credit back to the cultures museums are

pulling from is necessary and requires “repatriation and constructing contemporary native ideas through deconstructing [the] former” western ones that currently dominate the field (Kramer 2004, 174). The goal for the future would, then, be to allow for better future relations and ethical trade of cultural heritage, study, and representation by creating a space for borders to cross and interact instead of a place that produces them more of them.

That being said, the issues with removing heritage to safekeep in museums does not end there. Karp and Lavine (1991) examine the museum effect, or “the propensity of the museum for turning all objects into works of art,” correlating to a degree with the exotification of the ‘other’ or distant past, all the while generating a blurred lens for the audience to take at face value unaware of how the context has been altered (Karp & Lavine 1991, 198). Archeologists and museum curators are, then, self-appointed with the authority to claim what is best for physical heritage items all the while controlling whose voices get to be heard in exhibitions. In their critique of contemporary museums, Jones (1993) comments on how “whole towns... are turned into museum pieces, spectacles to satisfy... uncritical curiosity” that often ends up doing more harm than good, especially to communities whose heritage is being taken (Jones 1993, 573). Buildings, more so than artifacts, tend to make more an impact when taken for safekeeping in museums considering they usually hold strong ties to the people and place it was built in; When the building is taken from its original context, its soul is lost in the translation because it has been disconnected from its purpose. Learning to work with the cultural communities that have rich heritage instead of claiming to work for them only to exclude them from the conversation should be prioritized in the curation process.

CONCLUSION

While there is credence to both sides of the argument, in order to maintain an ethical position, the future of curation needs to witness a shift in their approach to not only include but center the needs and wants of the wider cultural community from which heritage pieces are being taken. Placing more focus on the object than the people who created it and gave it meaning is detrimental to the future of disciplines like archeology. Zimmermann (1998) suggests “a more humanist approach,” called “ethno-critical archaeology,” but either way there is a desperate need to build a new foundation based off of mutual respect and understanding (Zimmermann 1998, 83). The debate does not have to be entirely black and white, or fall entirely onto one side for a

solution. Recognizing past transgressions and taking accountability for unethical actions in the field should be expected, but moving forward, there should be a conscious attempt to deconstruct and redefine the current approach to museology.

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