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The History of the Hunt: Contemporary Discussions on Cultural Heritage in German Museums

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“The past is never dead. It is not even past.” This William Faulkner quote is relevant to consider when contemplating the place of historical items and artifacts in nations’ museums, long appraised to be bastions of knowledge, and showcasing to the world’s citizens what various nations have to offer. Anthropologists define these artifacts as “cultural heritage,” or a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions. One of the most historically rich countries on earth, Germany, is full of museums. What changed in recent years, especially in European countries with a colonial past, is a reexamination by activists and scholars on the conditions under which these items were brought to Europe, and if they were brought in under fair or immoral transactions. The major question that must be asked here is who owns the past and who gets to write about it, a process described by Germans as *die Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or coming to terms with the past. Germany is an exemplar in reckoning with its past, primarily due to its role in the Holocaust, albeit in this less discussed topic, more needs to be done.

Secrets Unfolded

Germany, and to some extent, European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium (former colonial powers) have problems reckoning with this past. The issue stems primarily from items stolen from those colonized areas and brought back to museums in Europe and elsewhere and what to do about items in storage and on exhibitions. They claim to be libraries of the world or that the transactions by which these items were acquired at the time were fair and nothing can be

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One of Germany's most infamous examples of stolen objects is the "Bust of Nefertiti," a likeness of Queen Nefertiti (who was married to the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten) created around 1345 B.C. in ancient Egypt. A joint German-Egyptian archaeological team rediscovered the bust in 1912. The Germans involved in this project scrupulously tried to hide the bust and brought it to Berlin, where it still resides. The debate on this object's return has some history to it as well. Even Hitler rejected its return, with a dream of placing it in a museum and boasting that he, "[would] never relinquish the head of the queen." The Egyptian government has called for its return ever since, but to no avail. This example is a microcosm of the problem of returning stolen artifacts or items from western museums, as many were acquired either under duress or were stolen. There is no exact number of such items in museums, which could be in the thousands; most are not even on display but in storage and often in terrible conditions. Many museums continue to claim that they are encyclopedias of human knowledge, yet they reject the idea that the artifacts that were taken can ever be returned due to museum policy and the belief that the items would be "safer" where they currently are residing.

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Western museums and institutions are recognizing this and, in some cases, returning these artifacts. A recent example in Germany's case is its return of a small collection of Benin Bronzes: cultural artifacts taken in a 1897 British punitive expedition in Nigeria, with some of those items later going to German museums. The German museum will return its items to Nigeria. However, the Nigerian government will allow some of the pieces to remain in Germany so Nigerians in Germany and Europe can still appreciate these artifacts.

The return of stolen items does not come without precedent. During the German Nazi rule, thousands of items were stolen throughout Europe and hidden away and had yet to be returned to their original stewards until after the war. In the late 1990s, a conference on this topic was held in Washington, D.C. It was titled "the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art," which called for the return of these still missing items to the original stewards. The conference released a statement; "In developing a consensus on non-binding principles to assist in resolving issues relating to Nazi-confiscated art, the Conference recognizes that among participating nations there are differing legal systems and that countries act within the context of their own laws." Stuart Eizenstat, former U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, organized the event with opening remarks by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, along with representatives from dozens of countries.

Contemporary Context

Themes from this conference can be applied to today's context when looking at the best way to examine items stolen during the colonial era that continue to reside in western museums and how to go about properly returning stolen items, as descendants from those formerly colonized areas are the loudest voices with regards to these items restitution. This is a path that German organizations, such as the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (*Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz*) in Berlin, can take when considering returning items to their original stewards, as well as properly looking at what is within their collections and making an effort to prevent the deterioration of these items. At the same time, they can reach out to the communities that items came from and create a dialogue for the best path moving forward in terms of reconciliation.

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Bronzes must be returned to modern-day Nigeria. “The important thing is not so much this option or that option but who gets to decide,” she said. “Is there an equitable conversation between source communities and museums to decide what happens to the objects?” This is just one recent example of leadership in museums taking it upon themselves to look at what exactly is in their collections and ways to go about returning items that they deemed to be problematic.

Afterward

As the famed author of *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe, once said, “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” These types of discussions about cultural heritage have become more prevalent in recent years and its prevalence will only increase. These actions would not be possible without the diaspora communities throughout Germany and the West who raise awareness about these injustices to the public. The return of these items to their proper places will not happen overnight. However, this dialogue must and will continue onwards as people around the world call on institutions to thoroughly re-examine what lies within their museums and who has rightful ownership of the past. Cultural organizations such as the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, must reckon with this problem to properly come to terms with the artifacts in its collection and resolve this issue until every item is returned to its rightful place of origin.

Germany • Colonialism • Historical Artifacts • Cultural Heritage

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