

# DECOLONIZING THE MUSEUM



Another contribution to an ongoing discussion at Stanford around the future of Classics and the Humanities [\[Link\]](#).

## Colonial loot

In 1897 a British military force burned and looted, murdered their way through the

capital city of the kingdom of Benin in west Africa. It was another dreadful act aimed at securing political and economic control across the continent, a culmination of centuries of exploitation that had included the Atlantic slave trade. Thousands died. Thousands of artifacts, brass plaques and sculptures, ivories and art pieces, were carried off, were sold, and are now to be found scattered through private collections and museums across the world, including the British Museum in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In recent posts I have been reflecting upon ways that we might account for and act against such appropriations of the past, sometimes violent, usually ideological. These artifacts are critical past presences in contemporary cultural politics, implicated in concepts of cultural heritage. I have been posing a question now often heard –

How might we reckon with colonial and imperial legacies in museums, in archaeological and anthropological works, in popular culture?

And particularly in the study of Graeco-Roman antiquity.

- decolonizing the future – [Link]
- seeking diverse voices – [Link] [Link]
- post classicism – [Link]



#### Benin artifacts in the British Museum

A century after the looting, in 1997, Bernie Grant, black Labour Party Member of Parliament for Tottenham in London, drew attention again to the injustice and called for the Benin artifacts to be sent back [Link]. The matter was well covered in the press (Richard Gott in *The Independent* February 22, 1997 [Link]). I recall it was by then part of a long-running campaign for repatriation of museum holdings. Anthony Snodgrass, Professor of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge, for example, has championed since the 1970s the return of the Parthenon marbles from the British Museum to Greece.

In the same year, 1997, Sven Lindqvist's book, *Exterminate all the Brutes* [Link], dug into this history of colonial oppression and its cultural ramifications. I was very much taken by how he showed the ways that Joseph Conrad had made manifest the colonial horrors in this *heart of darkness*.

Twenty years and more later, not much has changed. In a year so marked by global protest against enduring racial inequities and injustice, Dan Hicks, a curator at one of the museums that holds Benin artifacts, the Pitt Rivers in Oxford UK, has voiced his frustration. His book, *The Brutish Museums* (October 2020), turns Lindqvist's title, a reference to colonial attitudes towards Africa, against the institutions that he sees as failing in efforts to decolonize their collections.

# What might be done to decolonize museums?

How does Dan Hicks answer this question?

With a simple call to action, Hicks says –

## Confess and give the stuff back!

This call is aimed at professional curators like himself. He admits his book is “self-consciously anglocentric” (page xiii). To this end he stays close to home, his museum in Oxford, and makes the case that the work of the curator needs now to be what he calls *necrography* (after Achille Mbembe). This involves documenting the acts of looting, tracking the histories of artifacts in a kind of archaeology of museum collections, so that they might be returned whence they were taken. In so doing, curators of anthropology museums will be acting as the social conscience of their communities, reminding the rest of us of blame and culpability.

I actually don't want Dan Hicks as my social conscience. Let me explain.

No one will doubt the horrors of colonial imperialism and the implication of academic interests, nor that redress and account, reconciliation and redemption are needed. Is Hicks offering anything new?

His anger and calls for the dismantling of collections are not new, as I have mentioned. So what about the reasoning he uses, the case he makes for curation as *necrology* – a science of death?

Hicks is adamant that this is a new turn, founded in his own fresh theory of museological material culture. The book does not actually delve very deeply at all into such foundations. Don't expect to find a reasoned case for necrography in this book. Instead Hicks offers gestures of critique rooted in his personal and righteous indignation. He claims to have worked out the answer to the question of decolonizing museum collection. Without argument he trashes anthropological concepts of the unalienated gift after Mauss in the 30s (what about theft?, he asks). He trashes new materialist approaches to artifacts and their embeddedness in experience, and concepts of agency that extend beyond human subjectivity (outmoded tropes, he claims). He has no time for museum exhibitions that might explore the

vitality of artifacts and their implication in the richness of life, and in the complexity of, yes, social and cultural conflict, including the legacies of colonial imperialism.

So is the book to be read as an urgent and appropriate rhetorical gesture, and not so much as a reasoned argument? I suggest we should perhaps be generous and read the book in just this way – as a gesture of complaint. The involvement of collection in colonial violence is a critically important matter. We might forgive Hicks for not substantiating his case.

But I also suggest that we cannot ignore the foundations upon which Hicks builds this case. I suggest Hicks actually perpetuates the mindset and methodology that lie behind the practices of colonial collection that he wishes to eradicate.

## Precious things

Hicks is only concerned about property. The book outlines in great detail the circumstances surrounding the violent seizure of thousands of artifacts that have been incorporated into institutionally authorized accounts of the cultural superiority of imperial European powers. The book's focus is almost entirely upon goods and property – *precious things*. And violence.

But what of the *makers* of the stolen goods, their lives? What of the people of the kingdom of Benin, then, and now, further back in history beyond 1897, and in the future? These questions hardly concern Hicks. There is nothing of the people of Benin in his book.

Respect for the lives of those murdered, attention to the destruction of community and its reconstitution, surely involves an understanding of their creativity and labor, the *human* wealth, rather than just material goods in themselves. For without such an understanding we are in the same mindset as colonial thieves. Hicks is saying “our forebears took these things that are precious to you, and now we want to give them back to atone for the sin”.

Such an understanding advocated by Hicks associates senses of identity and the legacies of cultural heritage with property. Is this what Hicks's necrology involves – documenting the provenance of property, transfers of ownership? This would indeed be what he promotes – a *necrography* – documenting dead things. Dead – because they

are alienated, separated from the vital lifeworlds to which they belong.

Hicks is dealing, quite explicitly, in the *death* of human lifeworlds.

I suggest we might focus on life.

## The anthropologist as hero

Hicks makes no apologies for adopting the voice of the professional academic curator. Indeed he celebrates the (potential) agency of the role – the anthropologist as hero. We are assured that once museum curators have become necrologists, dealers in death, as he has, then they will have become society's conscience – heroes.

We might well ask if this is at all realistic, feasible, practical. We might doubt that this is the way institutions such as museums change (see my comments about change management – [\[Link\]](#)). How many are going to heed Hicks's heroic monologue? Are curators going to abandon a century of anthropological theory in favor of a few pages of a "necrological" manifesto penned by Hicks? It doesn't look like the Pitt Rivers Museum is rushing to follow his advice, and that's the institution where he holds a senior position. And even if the museum was dismantling its collections on necrological grounds, would you wish to have such an all-knowing authoritative voice as your (patriarchal) collective conscience?

How different is this voice to those that we have heard so often before? There have been many anthropologists before Hicks who have also claimed heroic insight into the fundamentals of their practice, into history and the nature of humanity. Included, of course, are those who collected Benin artifacts for their ethnological collections.

## Dialogics

Perhaps Hicks aims simply to make a clear call to action. Elsewhere he is quoted as holding that restitution is "fundamentally about listening to voices from the global south, Africa and African descendants in the UK and elsewhere" [\[Link\]](#).

It is crucial that we get involved in debates such as this, even when the likes of Hicks adopt a posture of one-sided monologue. We must not be put off, but embrace

his enthusiasm for necessary change, albeit through dialogue and deeper understanding.

So I end with some other voices, some links to dialogues in and around these difficult matters of legacy and injustice.

A report from the BBC (June 29 2020) offers more views from the British Museum – [Link] .

A report in the New York Times (January 2020) features other voices, Steve Dunstone and Timothy Awoyemi – [Link]

Museums and Heritage Advisor – [Link]

Above all I recommend Sathnam Sanghera's subtle and powerful *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (2021) – [Link]. I suggest Sathnam's voice is far more authentic than that adopted by Dan Hicks, Professor and Curator at Oxford University.

