# Museum Morals: Re-Evaluating the Collection, Exhibition, and Repatriation of Indigenous Cultural Belongings in the Modern Age

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## I. Introduction

The acquisition, display, and handling of Indigenous cultural artifacts by Eurocentrically-modeled museums have long been subjects of ethical debate.[1] These issues are deeply intertwined with colonialism, raising questions of power, representation, and cultural sensitivity. The act of collecting and exhibiting artifacts removed from their original contexts, often under the auspices of colonial expansion, reflects a legacy of exploitation and cultural appropriation.[2] As museums continue to grapple with their colonial pasts, the handling of these artifacts has become a focal point of global discourse, particularly in terms of repatriation and ethical stewardship. By examining these multifaceted issues and analyzing potential solutions, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions surrounding more ethical and culturally sensitive approaches to the handling, display, and interpretation of Indigenous cultural belongings in Eurocentrically-modeled museums. It will advocate for a greater shift away from authoritative, Eurocentric perspectives toward increasingly collaborative and inclusive practices that prioritize consultation and collaboration with source communities. While these issues are multifaceted and complex, this paper will concentrate on how numerous museum collections were acquired and how this impacts the representation of marginalized communities in contemporary institutions. Additionally, it will analyze current practices in the display and interpretation of Indigenous objects, explore the significance of repatriation, and examine the implications of those regulations, such as NAGPRA's new "duty of care" provisions and the complications arising when multiple groups claim affiliation with the same object, as well as the report from the Expert

[1] "Indigenous Definition and Meaning," Merriam Webster, accessed November 22, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous. The term Indigenous refers to people themselves, relating to, or descended from the earliest known inhabitant of a place and especially of a place that was colonized. I am using it to describe people, as well as their belongings and perspectives, that are native to an area and does not necessarily rely on the existence of colonization. Further, I am using this term to describe people, ideas, and objects of all time periods, existing both before colonialism and in a contemporary context.

[2] Susan M. Pearce, *Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Leicester University Press, 1993).

Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) to the United Nations Human Rights Council that includes recommendations for international standards regarding repatriation. By analyzing these issues, this paper aims to propose a more inclusive and thoughtful approach for museums in the form of "dialogic museums" moving forward in their treatment of Indigenous cultural belongings.

## II. Eurocentrically-Modeled Museums' Colonial Roots

For thousands of years, the seizure of cultural property has been used as a means to assert dominance over conquered peoples.[3] During war and conquest, pillaging served to compensate soldiers, affirm victory, and demonstrate superiority over the defeated.[4] In ancient Rome, looting and pillaging were generally accepted as inherent parts of warfare, with the expectation that victors would seize valuables and destroy the property of their enemies.[5] Over a thousand years later, Napoleon expanded on this idea by deliberately targeting cultural centers during his conquests, prioritizing the removal of cultural artifacts to further his vision of French global supremacy.[6] This approach was mirrored by another colonial power, Great Britain, during the same century as it extended its rule over South Asia and Africa, plundering or destroying tens of thousands of artifacts in the process.[7] In both Napoleonic France and British imperialism, the destruction was twofold: the physical loss of cultural objects and the erosion of the conquered

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[3] Salome Kiwara-Wilson, "Restituting Colonial Plunder: The Case for the Benin Bronzes and Ivories," *DePaul Journal of Art, Technology & Intellectual Property Law* 23, no. 2 (2013): 375, https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=jatip.
[4] Kirstin E. Petersen, "Cultural Apocalypse Now: The Loss of the Iraq Museum and a New Proposal for the Wartime Protection of Museums," *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 55, no. 16 (2007): 16, https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/mjil/55.
[5] Kiwara-Wilson, "Restituting Colonial Plunder," 387.
[6] Petersen, "Cultural Apocalypse Now," 167.
[7] Saby Ghoshray, "Repatriation of the Kohinoor Diamond: Expanding the Legal Paradigm for Cultural Heritage," *Fordham International Law Journal* 31, no. 3 (2007): 471, https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2098&context=ilj.

peoples' intangible cultural identity.[8] This wartime practice reveals a deep socio-psychological understanding of looting: by stripping a region of its cultural heritage and relocating its historical artifacts to their own museums, conquerors reinforced their dominance over the vanquished.[9] The appropriation of cultural property, as part of colonialism, inflicts “cultural wounds of deep significance” on the civilization from which it is taken.[10]

When invading colonizers take cultural property—whether through outright looting or coercive sales and one-sided negotiations—they frequently transport it back to their own countries for storage and display.[11] Museums have often served as repositories for these stolen artifacts. Cultural giants like the Louvre and the British Museum took on their modern forms in the 18th century, when colonizing powers used them to showcase the spoils of their imperial conquests. As European imperialism thrived, citizens of countries like Great Britain and France became fascinated with “exotic” objects from their colonies.[12] To satisfy this curiosity, museums began housing vast collections of foreign cultural items. For example, in cities like London and Paris, the demand for ancient Egyptian artifacts was so voracious that museums were willing to import entire rooms, friezes, and tombs from the Mediterranean region.[13] England’s unrelenting quest to build up its museum collections resulted in the expansion of Egyptology at the British Museum, which today attracts five million visitors annually to view “the largest and most comprehensive collection of [Egyptian antiquities] outside Cairo.”[14] Antiquities dealers were

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[8] Ghoshray, “Repatriation of the Kohinoor Diamond,” 472.
[9] Ghoshray, “Repatriation of the Kohinoor Diamond,” 472.
[10] Ghoshray, “Repatriation of the Kohinoor Diamond,” 772.
[11] Katharine N. Skinner, “Restituting Nazi-Looted Art: Domestic, Legislative, and Binding Intervention to Balance the Interests of Victims and Museums,” *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law* 15, no. 3 (2013): 673, https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1229&context=jetlaw.
[12] Maya Lucyshyn, “Western Art Museum and the Legacy of Imperialism: The Successes, Shortcomings, and Future of the Art Repatriation Movement.” *Temple International and Comparative Law Journal* 36, no. 1 (2021): 125, https://sites.temple.edu/ticlj/files/2023/02/Lucyshyn-Western-Art-Museums-119-149.pdf.
[13] Lucyshyn, “Western Art Museum and the Legacy of Imperialism,” 125.
[14] Lucyshyn, “Western Art Museum and the Legacy of Imperialism,” 125.

encouraged to procure rare objects with the promise that "[w]hatever the expense of the undertaking, it would be most cheerfully supported by an enlightened nation, eager to outpace its rivals in the pursuit of scientific and literary advancement."[15] This led to large-scale excavation projects in Egypt, sub-Saharan Africa, Central and South America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, the cultural impact of which is almost impossible to measure.

One of the most well-known examples of colonial plundering and looting to take place on the African continent is the theft of the Benin Bronzes and destruction of Benin City by British colonial troops in 1897.[16] The British aimed to expand their political and commercial influence in West Africa by exiling the King of Benin, Ọba Ovonramwen, destroying his trade monopoly in the Niger Delta, and colonizing his kingdom.[17] The Benin Bronzes, a collection of about 5,000 artifacts mostly created between the 13th and 16th centuries, include bronze regalia, plaques, sculptures of people and animals, as well as ivory, coral, and wooden objects.[18] Some were given to Queen Victoria, while others were kept by the troops or sold for profit in West Africa, England, and beyond, and many of these pieces ended up in museums around the world.[19] This violent exploitation left a long-lasting cultural impact. Theo-Ben Gurirab, former president of the United Nations General Assembly and former Prime Minister of Namibia stated:

> These works form an integral part of defining our identity and personality as family, as African family. We talk to them. They talk to us. We touch them at certain moments of our lives, from birth through life to death. It is through them that the living spirits of our people, of our history, of our culture interact and interface with us. They are not there, hence the void in our minds and in our hearts. We continue to cry for them to come back home, to complete that cultural, spiritual space.[20]

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[15] Lucyshyn, "Western Art Museum and the Legacy of Imperialism," 126.
[16] Emma Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes, and the London Museum Returning Them," *National Geographic*, September 17, 2022, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/nigeria-stolen-benin-bronzes-london-museum.
[17] Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes."
[18] Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes."
[19] Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes."
[20] Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, *Claiming the Stones/Naming the Bones: Cultural Property and the Negotiation of National and Ethnic Identity* (Getty Publications, 2002), 1.

As this example demonstrates, colonial looting creates a cultural rupture for communities across the world, severing generations from their heritage and fracturing the spiritual and historical continuity that artifacts provide.

**III. The Impact of Colonialism on Museum Practices**

In addition to the cultural rupture caused by historical acquisition practices, the decontextualization of material culture also profoundly shaped the way these objects are perceived and presented, often reinforcing colonial narratives. Susan Vogel, an influential American art historian and curator specializing in African art, in her essay "Always True to the Object, In Our Fashion," uses African art as a prime example of the way that an object's display in Eurocentrically-modeled museums often strips it of its original context and assigns new meanings based on Eurocentrically-modeled aesthetics and values.[21] This process of recontextualization frequently results in the reinforcement of colonial narratives, as the objects are presented through a lens that reflects the power dynamics of colonialism. For example, the Wellcome Collection, a museum and library in London, was built from the collection of Sir Henry Wellcome, who was a pharmaceutical businessman and was interested in the art and science of healing throughout history.[22] He built his collection through mass acquisitions from the British auction and dealer market and a network of agents in Europe, the Middle East, the Americas and South Asia.[23] Collection of these cultural belongings were often picked up as personal souvenirs or ethnographic specimens by military officers, colonial administrators,

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[21] Susan Vogel, "Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion." in *Grasping the World*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Routledge, 2019), 522.
[22] "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response." Wellcome Collection, accessed October 28, 2024, https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/the-colonial-roots-of-our-collections--and-our-response.
[23] Wellcome, "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response."

missionaries, scientists, merchants, and others visiting the areas.[24] These collection methods often exploited the communities they were taking from without concern for any information regarding the objects or the impact of their actions upon these people. Wellcome's museum followed the model of cultural hierarchy that most European museums in the late-19th century did and exhibited cultural belongings in a way that framed Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color in an exotic, lesser, and exploitative manner, highlighting the ways in which unethical collection methods contribute to legacy of colonial narratives within museum spaces. For example, a pair of emu-feather kurdaitcha-man's shoes originating from Arrernte country in what is currently known as the central region of the Northern Territory of Australia were a part of the collection because the donor had a theory that Indigenous Australians and European Caucasians were closely genetically related (Figure 1).[25] This theory became crucial to the practice of relocating mixed-race children to re-education camps, as well as bio-engineering experiments aimed at successively removing certain phenotypical features that were understood as "markers of race."[26] Items, such as these, as well as other from Wellcome's collection, were separated from their original context and were used to tell a colonial version of the history of global health and medicine— one that privileges European medical understanding over Indigenous and other forms of local knowledge.

The study of Indigenous art within Eurocentric academia is deeply intertwined with the ethical dilemmas posed by the colonial origins of many museum collections. This connection is rooted in a racialized knowledge system that has shaped how these objects are viewed, classified,

[24] Wellcome, "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response."
[25] Shelley Saggar, "Secret Items in the Wellcome Historical Medical Collections," *The Polyphony*, November 12, 2019, https://thepolyphony.org/2019/11/14/secret-items-in-the-wellcome-historical-medical-collections/.
[26] Saggar, "Secret Items."

and interpreted.[27] Scholar Nkiru Nzegwu asserts that hegemonic theories of art and aesthetics are often built upon a racist foundation, stemming from a historical context of colonialism and white supremacy.[28] These theories, consciously or unconsciously, perpetuate a hierarchy that positions Eurocentric art as superior, while relegating Indigenous art to a lower status. For example, Susan Vogel and Arthur Danto, in their 1988 exhibition *Art/Artifact*, claim that African people "do not distinguish between art and other manufactured objects" and that no concept or word for art exists in any African language.[29] These claims are both untrue and the ignore the diverse aesthetic systems and philosophies present in African cultures.[30] Further, it suggests that Vogel has an understanding of the more than two thousand languages spoken across the African continent, and an average viewer is not informed enough to challenge this oversimplification. Danto's arguments are similarly oversimplified and perpetuate the notion of African art as "primitive" and lacking the intellectual depth of Eurocentric art.[31] His reliance on hypothetical examples of "African tribes" and his comparison of African art to ancient Greek art are attempts to position African art as belonging to a distant, less developed past.[32] As this example demonstrates, the favoring of curators and scholars with a Eurocentric lens who assume the role of "experts" on Indigenous art, has the ability to erase the voices and perspectives of those communities and results in a harmful cycle. Such constructed narratives that privilege hegemonic understandings of Indigenous objects are deeply rooted in upholding white supremacy and contribute to the way they are presented and understood in museum settings.

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[27] Nkira Nzegwu, "African Art in Deep Time: De-racing Aesthetics and De-racing Visual Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77, no. 4 (2019) 367. https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12674.
[28] Nzegwu, "African Art in Deep Time," 368-369.
[29] Nzegwu, "African Art in Deep Time," 370.
[30] Nzegwu, "African Art in Deep Time," 370.
[31] Nzegwu, "African Art in Deep Time," 372.
[32] Nzegwu, "African Art in Deep Time," 372.

The legacy of racialized knowledge systems established by colonialism has profoundly shaped how Indigenous cultural belongings are viewed, classified, and interpreted in Eurocentrically-modeled museums, reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges hegemonic perspectives over Indigenous voices. This system dismisses Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)—which include cultural, environmental, and socio-economic knowledge—by often categorizing them as primarily "utilitarian" or "ceremonial."[33] Such classifications deny the full cultural significance of these works, marginalizing the voices of those with direct connections to them. For instance, the introduction to *Indian Art of the United States*, a 1941 exhibition catalog at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, exemplifies this bias. Curators Frederic H. Douglas and Rene d'Harnoncourt claimed that the concept of "fine art for art's sake" was largely unfamiliar to Native cultures.[34] By relegating Native American art entirely to the label of "craft," curators with a Eurocentric perspective are perpetuating a hierarchy that discredits Indigenous knowledge and art, and therefore contributed to the broader belief among anthropologists and art historians with a Eurocentric perspective at the time that Native material culture was purely functional before European contact.[35]

These historical systems also prioritize written history over oral tradition, further marginalizing Indigenous perspectives and contributing to a dominant narrative that portrays subaltern people as "primitive" or "uncivilized."[36] As Kiowa beadworker Teri Greeves asserts, her work is an artistic expression connected to her ancestors, reflecting a continuity of tradition

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[33] "Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge," National Park Service, accessed November 5, 2024. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tek/description.htm; Anya Montiel, "Embodying Indigenous Identity and Place." in *Crafting America: Artists and Objects, 1940 to Today*, ed. Glenn Adamson and Jen Padgett (University of Arkansas Press, 2021), 22.
[34] Montiel, "Embodying Indigenous Identity and Place," 22.
[35] Montiel, "Embodying Indigenous Identity and Place," 22.
[36] In postcolonial theory, subaltern refers to peoples who have lost human agency as a result of cultural imperialism. I am using it here to describe people who were disenfranchised under colonialism, as well as contemporary people who continue to be impacted by those imbalanced power structures.

and storytelling that hegemonic frameworks often overlook.[37] In Eurocentrically-modeled museums, this ongoing epistemic injustice both excludes authentic interpretations of Indigenous cultural belongings and enforces a hierarchy that marginalizes Indigenous contributions to art and history. As museums grapple with their colonial pasts, they must confront the ethical complexities of provenance and display, acknowledging that true understanding requires the inclusion and elevation of Indigenous perspectives in discussions about their own cultural heritage.

## IV. Current Perspectives on Best Practices

When turning to the 21st century, there has been a marked shift in recognizing the agency and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in the handling and exhibition of their cultural belongings within museum environments. In a conversation between museum leaders at the American Alliance of Museums' Virtual Annual Meeting in June 2020, professionals emphasized the need for museums to prioritize the needs and perspectives of their communities, particularly those who have been historically marginalized.[38] The participants highlight the importance of museums "bringing community in for dialogue and conversation" and placing "community, education, and collaboration at the center."[39] This approach aligns with the broader trend of consultation and consent in ethical museum work, recognizing that museums are accountable to the communities they serve.

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[37] Montiel, "Embodying Indigenous Identity and Place," 21.
[38] Johnetta B. Cole, Lonnie G. Bunch, and Fogarty Lori, "Racism, Unrest, and the Role of the Museum Field: A Conversation at the American Alliance of Museums Virtual Annual Meeting (2020)," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 3 (2020): 304. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/cura.12379
[39] Cole, "Racism, Unrest, and the Role of the Museum Field," 304.

Consultation, collaboration, and obtaining consent from source communities are becoming increasingly central to ethical museum work. This shift signifies a departure from traditional museum practices that often excluded or marginalized the perspectives of those whose cultures were being represented. Many museums are exploring new ways of incorporating traditional knowledge and cultural perspectives into the display and interpretation of cultural belongings.

The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia exemplifies how museums are elevating Indigenous voices to bring greater cultural context into their exhibitions. Established in 1949 and rooted in collaborations with Indigenous, local, and global communities, MOA has evolved into a hub for promoting awareness of varied cultural epistemologies.[40] Through innovative programs and partnerships, MOA fosters understanding of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, exemplified by its Native Youth Program, which trains Indigenous high school students and stands as the longest-running program of its kind in British Columbia.[41] Its exhibitions celebrate artistic diversity and connect art with social and political narratives that resonate with contemporary communities, including a focus on Northwest Coast art and works by Musqueam artists, who honor the unceded Musqueam territory on which MOA resides.[42] Since its 2010 expansion, MOA has bolstered its educational and research capacities, incorporating new labs, archives, and a dedicated oral history language lab that enhances its ability to document and preserve cultural narratives.[43] By hosting faculty, students, and visitors in a setting that honors Indigenous perspectives and diverse worldviews, MOA underscores its commitment to being a leading voice in culturally informed museum practices.[44] From June 2024

[40] "Museum of Anthropology (MOA)," Visit UBC Vancouver Campus Attractions, accessed October 28, 2024, https://visit.ubc.ca/see-and-do/museums-and-art-galleries/museum-of-anthropology/.
[41] "Museum of Anthropology (MOA)."
[42] "Museum of Anthropology (MOA)."
[43] "Museum of Anthropology (MOA)."
[44] "Museum of Anthropology (MOA)."

to March 2025, the exhibition *To Be Seen, To Be Heard: First Nations in Public Spaces*, 1900-1965 is on view.[45] This multimedia exhibition, curated by MOA Curator Karen Duffek and Tsimshian-Haida art historian Dr. Marcia Crosby, presents large-scale archival photographs, film, and First Nations artifacts to highlight how, during periods of cultural suppression, British Columbia's First Nations asserted their Indigenous identity in urban public spaces through parades, protests, royal visits, and more.[46] By displaying these historical images alongside audio reflections from contemporary Indigenous voices, the exhibition reveals the resilience of First Nations people in claiming visibility and rights to their lands, laws, and future.[47] The artifacts, now part of MOA's collection, face the projections, reconnecting them to their historical context (Figure 2). This dynamic setup allows visitors to engage with the perspectives of First Nations peoples as they gaze through time and space to communicate their enduring vision for their future.[48]

Revisiting the Wellcome Collection, this museum has laid out specific plans to reevaluate and reframe the ways in which their collections are managed and used. They are undertaking a comprehensive inventory of their collections, aiming to provide equitable access to all items and highlight content that has been historically marginalized.[49] They have digitized and made available archival records that document the acquisition and dispersal of their collections and are working toward making this information more transparent and accessible.[50] The museum is fostering a diverse research community that critically engages with their collections, encouraging the creation of knowledge that extends beyond their institution, saying "[they] want to engage

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[45] "To Be Seen, To Be Heard," Museum of Anthropology at UBC, June 2024, https://moa.ubc.ca/exhibition/to-be-seen-to-be-heard/.
[46] "To Be Seen, To Be Heard."
[47] "To Be Seen, To Be Heard."
[48] "To Be Seen, To Be Heard."
[49] Wellcome, "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response."
[50] Wellcome, "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response."

with voices that will challenge [their] assumptions, breathe new life and meaning into [their] collections, and change [their] understanding of the objects in [their] care."[51] This process will involve collaborative research into the origins of the objects, with transparency about what they learn.[52] When the history of an object has been lost or erased, they will connect with individuals whose life experiences may help uncover its contemporary meanings.[53] They are committed to consult respectfully and act appropriately when dealing with human remains and sacred objects in their care and welcome claims for the restitution of such artifacts.[54] The transformation of this collection highlights the concept of the "dialogic museum" model that some in the museum field are advocating for, emphasizing two-way communication and shared authority in shaping museum experiences.

The dialogic museum shifts the traditional power dynamics of museums, moving away from a one-sided presentation of history and culture towards a more collaborative and participatory approach.[55] Instead of acting as the sole authority on knowledge, the dialogic museum positions itself as a facilitator of conversations between the museum and its diverse communities.[56] This shift is reflected in how exhibits are conceived and presented. During the development of exhibitions, community engagement is prioritized and diverse voices and perspectives are incorporated into the storytelling process.[57] Rather than simply presenting

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[51] Wellcome, "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response."
[52] Wellcome, "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response."
[53] Wellcome, "The Colonial Roots of Our Collections, and Our Response."
[54] Regarding the scope of this paper, I am analyzing museum websites and resources relating to how they are attempting to re-examine, research, and reframe their collections in a more inclusive manner. However, it is important to note that others in the field have different perspectives on the Wellcome Collection and whether they are truly fulfilling the standards they have set forth for themselves.
[55] Stanislao Carbone, "The Dialogic Museum and Ethnocultural Diversity," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005): 128. https://ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/dialogic-museum-ethnocultural-diversity/docview/215637637/se-2.
[56] Carbone, "Dialogic Museum," 130.
[57] Carbone, "Dialogic Museum," 130.

objects as isolated artifacts, the dialogic museum seeks to connect them to the lived experiences of individuals and communities.[58] This approach helps visitors understand the human stories behind the objects and encourages empathy and understanding across cultures. Further, dialogic museums should go beyond simply providing information and encourage visitors to critically engage with the presented narratives. This can be achieved through interactive exhibits, open-ended questions, and opportunities for visitors to share their own perspectives and interpretations.[59] Overall, the dialogic museum strives to be a space for open and respectful dialogue, where multiple voices can be heard, and where visitors are empowered to become active participants in the process of meaning-making.

## V. Repatriation: A Complex and Evolving Issue

In addition to encouraging collaborative and participatory approaches to museum practices, another significant issue facing museums today is repatriation. The process of repatriation is a complex and evolving issue that is not simply about the physical return of objects but also involves addressing historical injustices and fostering healing for communities. The ethnographic collections of many contemporary museums were assembled during periods of colonial occupation, when "salvage collecting" was allegedly thought to be essential for preserving evidence of cultures believed to be vanishing.[60] The repatriation movement centers on the return of cultural objects and human remains to their communities of origin, particularly those that were taken during periods of colonialism. It represents a powerful challenge to the traditional authority of Eurocentrically-modeled museums, demanding they acknowledge and

[58] Carbone, "Dialogic Museum," 130.
[59] Carbone, "Dialogic Museum," 132.
[60] Moira Simpson, "Museums and Restorative Justice: Heritage, Repatriation and Cultural Education," *Museum International* 61, no. 1-2 (2009): 128. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0033.2009.01669.x.

rectify past injustices and engage in ethical practices of cultural stewardship for the well-being of source communities. Many subaltern communities around the world play a proactive role in demanding the return of their ancestors' remains and sacred cultural belongings. Returning to the example of the Benin Bronzes, Nigeria's effort to reclaim the bronzes started in the 1930s, gained momentum after independence in 1960, and accelerated in 2007 with the creation of the Benin Dialogue Group.[61] This working group includes representatives from Nigerian and European cultural institutions and is dedicated to returning the artifacts to Benin City.[62] Since 2021, more than 50 objects have been returned to Nigeria and have resulted in a revitalization and pride for source communities. "[The Bronzes] are evidence of an organized society and symbolize the ingenuity of our people."[63] One community member says, "They are the very pedestal which our ancestors built for us to expand on."[64]

It has been shown that the repatriation of cultural artifacts to subaltern communities is important for cultural renewal and recovering from post-colonial trauma, which ultimately improves the health and well-being of those communities.[65] Objects become more meaningful when returned to their place of origin because they can be used for the education purposes for Indigenous people within the community generationally and can work as a tool for providing the public with a greater education in the form of Indigenous museums.[66] After the repatriation of ancestral remains and cultural artifacts to the Haida culture in British Columbia, Nika Collison, curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum and a member of the Haida Repatriation Committee, is quoted saying, "[The return of cultural belongings] made a larger portion of our community

[61] Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes."
[62] Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes."
[63] Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes."
[64] Gregg, "The Story of Nigeria's Stolen Benin Bronzes."
[65] Simpson, "Museums and Restorative Justice," 123.
[66] Simpson, "Museums and Restorative Justice," 125.

relearn our old ways, and that's brought more people to learn our songs and dances, and to learn about our ceremonies, and to relearn ancient burial techniques and traditions that may not have otherwise been used any longer, and it brings our whole community together."[67] Preserving and renewing intangible aspects of heritage and culture can be done by reintroducing artifacts that are traditionally used in ceremony to a community of people. These practices contribute to the health and well-being of Indigenous communities through both personal healing and community revitalization.

While repatriation has been shown to have positive effects for source communities, there are still many complications surrounding the process especially with recent changes to the regulations of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The regulations emphasize consultation, collaboration, and obtaining "free, prior, and informed consent" from lineal descendants, Native American Tribes, and Native Hawaiian Organizations before museums can exhibit, provide access to, or conduct research on human remains and cultural items.[68] This reflects a shift towards prioritizing the voices and perspectives of source communities in managing cultural heritage. The newly revised NAGPRA regulations introduce a "duty of care," requiring museums to consult with source communities about the storage, treatment, and handling of human remains and cultural items.[69] This obligation includes accommodating requests that may deviate from typical museum practices, such as allowing the application of traditional oils or substances for spiritual protection.[70] However, there are concerns about this requirement's vagueness and the potential for differing interpretations among

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[67] Simpson, "Museums and Restorative Justice," 127.
[68] Office of the Secretary, Department of the Interior, "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Systematic Processes for Disposition or Repatriation of Native American Human Remains, Funerary Objects, Sacred Objects, and Objects of Cultural Patrimony," *Federal Register* 88, no. 238 (December 13, 2023): 86453, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2023-12-13/pdf/2023-27040.pdf
[69] Department of the Interior, "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act," 86461.
[70] Department of the Interior, "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act," 86462.

parties. To mitigate this, the regulations emphasize a “reasonable and good-faith effort” and require detailed documentation of agreements and disagreements reached during the consultation process.[71]

For the successful implementation of the new NAGPRA regulations across museums, it is essential to build clarity and trust around the interpretive latitude allowed to different parties. The language around a “reasonable and good-faith effort” and the emphasis on detailed documentation can be expanded with specific strategies that ensure transparency, consistency, and accountability. By creating standard operating procedures that outline what constitutes “reasonable and good-faith effort,” institutions and Indigenous tribes can build mutual understanding on expectations. This might include time frames for responses, communication protocols, and specifics of documentation requirements. It could also be helpful to have concrete examples, either hypothetical or from case studies, to guide institutions on fulfilling the duty of care. This could address areas such as levels of documentation needed for consultations, handling disagreements, and ensuring culturally respectful practices. While institutions will still have to act on a case-by-case basis, the standardization of practices and having examples to base their decisions from would be helpful for tools for museums to know whether they are fulfilling their responsibilities to the fullest extent regarding NAGPRA.

The regulations also acknowledge the complex issue of multiple groups claiming affiliation with the same belongings. When encountering competing claims for repatriation, museums and federal agencies are tasked with determining the group with the “closest cultural affiliation.”[72] This determination involves considering factors beyond geographical location, with a priority given to information about shared group identity and cultural practices. When

[71] Department of the Interior, “Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,” 86462-86463.
[72] Department of the Interior, “Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,” 86483.

multiple groups lay claim to a single belonging, NAGPRA regulations provide the following steps to determine "closest cultural affiliation," with the understanding that the museum or federal agency must rely on a "preponderance of the evidence" standard, meaning the claim with the most supporting evidence will prevail.

1. Clearly Identified Cultural Affiliation: The Indian Tribe whose cultural affiliation is clearly identified by the available information has the highest priority.
2. Reasonably Identified Cultural Affiliation Based on Geography and Acquisition History: The next priority is given to the tribe whose cultural affiliation is reasonably identified by both the geographical location and acquisition history of the items.
3. Reasonably Identified Cultural Affiliation Based on Geography Alone: If the previous criteria don't result in a clear determination, priority is given to the tribe whose cultural affiliation is reasonably identified by the geographical location of the items.
4. Reasonably Identified Cultural Affiliation Based on Acquisition History Alone: The lowest priority is given to the tribe whose cultural affiliation is reasonably identified solely by the acquisition history of the items.

I was unable to find examples of this approach being put into practice, and therefore, cannot comment of the efficacy of these steps. However, these guidelines are vague and do not specify what kind of documentation is necessary or expected in these cases. This could be a form of "neo-colonialism," as museums and federal agencies ultimately must make the decision about who receives the cultural belonging. This hinges on who is involved in defining group identity and cultural affiliation, the involvement of Indigenous people in this process, and what sort of documentation is being used and is prioritized in these situations. Creating a decision-making framework that is more transparent, inclusive, and culturally sensitive is essential for the

implementation of these practices in museum spaces. This framework should clearly outline the types of documentation that can substantiate cultural affiliation claims, explicitly valuing oral histories, testimonies from cultural leaders, and other forms of evidence that demonstrate Indigenous perspectives. This should include Indigenous language descriptions, artistic styles, traditional knowledge systems, and documented cultural practices. Additionally, museums and agencies should document and publicly release their evaluation process and reasoning. This transparency could help ensure accountability and make the decision criteria clearer for all stakeholders. Further, museums and agencies should partner with Indigenous communities to research cultural belonging histories collaboratively, which may reveal previously unconsidered cultural links or contexts. This cooperative approach could clarify affiliations, support joint stewardship agreements, and avoid placing the burden of proof on Indigenous communities.

On an international level, the report from the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) to the United Nations Human Rights Council, published in 2020, also examines the repatriation of Indigenous peoples' ceremonial objects, human remains, and intangible cultural heritage. The report recognizes the importance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), finalized in 2007, and provides recommendations for States, museums, and other stakeholders to implement these rights.[73] The document gives attention to explaining the significance of Indigenous peoples' cultural heritage, acknowledging the historical injustices and dispossession that led to the need for repatriation, and stressing the importance of interpreting repatriation under UNDRIP. Particularly, Articles 11, 12, and 31, which address Indigenous peoples' rights to equality, non-discrimination, self-

[73] United Nations Human Rights Council, Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. *Repatriation of Ceremonial Objects, Human Remains and Intangible Cultural Heritage Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UN Headquarters, 2016), 2.

determination, participation and consultation, are emphasized as essential to guiding repatriation practices.

Similar to NAGPRA, the report states that museums must develop relationships of collaboration and trust, and seek out and respect Indigenous peoples' knowledge, protocols, traditional laws, and customs regarding items in their collections.[74] It further encourages Indigenous peoples to pursue reconciliation with museums and other cultural institutions through repatriation processes and by establishing meaningful relationships with museums.[75] It emphasizes that partnerships of this type are essential in order to decolonize museums. These acknowledgments and guidelines from an influential international organization are greatly important to the progression of museums moving away from a colonial model and the repatriation of Indigenous cultural belongings.

The report also recommends that States recognize Indigenous concerns about human remains, ceremonial objects, and cultural heritage, and consider not only national interests but also Indigenous peoples' rights when making claims for protection or repatriation.[76] Similarly, it recommends that a determination of whether an item is "illicit" or "stolen" property should include analysis of both State and Indigenous laws. These laws "set out standards of alienability, ownership, treatment and custody of ceremonial objects, human remains and spiritual, intellectual and other properties."[77] While these are critical steps in moving forward in a collaborative manner with Indigenous groups, Indigenous laws and protocols are diverse and

[74] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Repatriation Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 10.
[75] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Repatriation Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 19.
[76] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Repatriation Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 18.
[77] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Repatriation Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 18.

context-specific, which could present challenges to standardize their integration into national and international frameworks. Further, Indigenous communities may face challenges in negotiating with States or institutions due to unequal access to resources, legal support, and bargaining power. To ensure that Indigenous perspectives and laws are considered, there should be a requirement that institutions and States document and publicly report their repatriation efforts, as well as legal procedures and meetings with Indigenous groups, to ensure accountability. Further, there should be an effort to enact binding laws aligned with UNDRIP, consisting of clear guidelines on resolving disputes between State and Indigenous laws.[78]

The report further recommends that States should enact or reform legislation on repatriation in accordance with the UNDRIP with the "full and meaningful participation" of Indigenous peoples and the safeguard of "free, prior, and informed consent."[79] This includes statutes, regulations, and policies on museum collections, deaccession, and repatriation. When there are ambiguities or challenges with implementation, the Declaration can be used as an interpretive tool.[80] While this is a good step for encouraging individual nations to incorporate repatriation policy into their legislation, it is inevitable that varying interpretations and enforcement across jurisdictions will lead to fragmented practices. This, along with the other recommendations laid out by the report, are vague and do not provide substantial guidelines for nuances of the repatriation process. It is essential that specific regulations are refined and more detailed processes that hold both States and museums accountable are put in place to ensure

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[78] The document also makes recommendations about ways in which international organizations such as UNESCO and WIPO should help in facilitating repatriation and answering questions surrounding those processes. Further, the report state that all such programs for repatriation must be fully funded so that museums and Indigenous peoples do not bear the burden of States complying with their human rights obligations. While important in understanding and addressing repatriation policy, these particular nuances fall outside of the scope this paper.

[79] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Repatriation Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 18.

[80] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Repatriation Under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 18.

alignment with UNDRIP and allow for the genuine collaboration between institutions and Indigenous groups.

## VI. Potential Solutions and Future Directions

While reconciling the collection, interpretation, and exhibition of Indigenous cultural belongings is a deeply complex and multi-faceted issue, Eurocentrically-modeled museums should utilize a combination of the strategies that have been discussed throughout this paper to approach the collection, display, and interpretation of Indigenous cultural belongings within their collections. First and foremost, Eurocentrically-modeled museums need to be in ongoing communication and collaboration with source communities regarding their cultural objects. To do this, museums will need to inventory their existing collections and conduct extensive research into the acquisition and contemporary meaning of those objects like the Wellcome Collection is currently doing. Further, these inventories should be readily accessible and publicly available in order to create transparency, built trust with the public, and keep institutions accountable. Creating partnerships with source communities to develop culturally appropriate exhibition and educational programs is essential to providing full and nuanced historical and social context to the public about Indigenous cultural belongings. The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver highlights ways that collaboration with Indigenous communities can bring greater curiosity and cultivation of community. These approaches are a great starting place to shifting the ways in which museums engage with their communities and work toward a more inclusive and accurate knowledge-sharing system.

If during or after this consultation process, a source community requests their cultural belongings be returned to them, museums should be willing and helpful participants in

repatriating those objects. To make this transition smoother, it is critical that detailed and transparent repatriation policies and procedures are developed. While the revised NAGPRA regulations are a definitive step in the right direction, there is still work to be done regarding the clarity and specificity of how museums should handle various complexities like defining what constitutes “reasonable and good-faith efforts” or clarify how to address when multiple groups lay claim to a single cultural belonging. It is also commendable when information is made available to the public regarding repatriation of cultural belongings to their communities of origin when it does happen because museum collections are held in the public trust. In one example, an exhibition showcasing dozens of Benin Bronzes, which were officially returned to Nigeria after the show, was set up in Berlin for what may be the last time.[81] Unlike the previous display of these objects, this exhibition detailed the theft of the objects in 1897 when British forces looted the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin and destroyed much of Benin City, as well as the objects’ journey since then. There are diagrams and images showing how the bronzes were acquired from European traders and British soldiers looking triumphant atop piles of loot. There was even a room within the exhibit dedicated to explaining the importance of repatriating these items to their place of origin in which videos of scholars, artists, curators, and representatives of the royal family in Benin City play. While the objects were ultimately returned to their country of origin, this exhibition allowed the public to see them in a space that does not shy away from their complicated history, but rather took accountability for it. These types of exhibitions help to educate visitors in a way that gives these cultural belongings and the communities they were taken from the respect they deserve.

[81] “Benin Bronzes Go on Last Exhibition in Berlin Before Repatriation.” *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2022. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/15/benin-bronzes-go-on-last-exhibition-in-berlin-before-repatriation#:~:text=Stolen%20during%20the%20colonial%20era,returning%20to%20their%20original%20home.

Lastly, reshaping the museum experience and institution as a whole to acknowledge and repair the unjust hierarchies they were built to uphold requires more attention. While it is an admirable and necessary effort, it is impossible to tackle such a large, systemic problem at the current moment when we are still addressing the symptoms of it like working toward collaboration with source communities and clarifying repatriation policy to make those experiences smoother. Ultimately, the museum model does need to be restructured, as it often inherently privileges a single, unquestioned perspective. The dialogic museum model disrupts the authoritarian voice of the current museum institution and encourages diverse perspectives that create a space for understanding and connection regarding complicated topics. Museums are non-profit institutions that are held in the public trust and should reflect that by being spaces in which people feel seen, heard, and represented.

## VII. Conclusion

While all of these issues require immense effort, energy, and time, they are essential to building and maintaining trust with the public and creating more equitable institutions that uphold admirable values. Eurocentrically-modeled museums, often built upon colonial foundations, face an urgent need to address the legacies of exploitation and cultural appropriation embedded in their collections. The historical context of looting and coercive acquisition practices during colonial expansion has resulted in the displacement of countless cultural belongings, creating cultural ruptures for Indigenous communities worldwide. The act of removing these items from their original contexts and displaying them within Eurocentric frameworks has often reinforced colonial narratives, stripping them of their intended meaning and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Transforming museum practices requires a fundamental shift in mindset, moving

away from colonial legacies toward a more equitable and inclusive approach to cultural heritage. Repatriation plays a vital role in this process, addressing historical injustices and fostering healing for Indigenous communities. The return of cultural objects, such as the Benin Bronzes, signifies a powerful act of cultural revitalization and reclamation. However, the complexities surrounding repatriation, including legal frameworks like NAGPRA and the EMRIP report, require careful consideration and culturally sensitive approaches. Moving forward, Eurocentrically-modeled museums must adopt a multifaceted approach that centers on transparency, collaboration, and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems. This includes engaging in continuous dialogue with source communities to understand the cultural significance of objects and develop culturally appropriate exhibitions and educational programs, developing clear and transparent repatriation policies and procedures that prioritize the needs and perspectives of Indigenous people, and embracing the dialogic museum model, which encourages two-way communication and shared authority in shaping museum experiences. Ultimately, transforming the museum experience requires a fundamental shift away from colonial paradigms towards a more inclusive and equitable representation of human history and culture. By acknowledging past injustices, prioritizing collaboration, and centering Indigenous voices, museums can become spaces for genuine dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation.

Figures

Figure 1. Pair of Ceremonial Emu-Feathered Kurdaitcha Moccasins, similar to those found in the Wellcome Collection, date unknown. Fiber, emu feather and human hair; 5 x 9 x 1 in. Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, CA.

Figure 2. *To Be Seen, To Be Heard* Exhibition at The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2024.

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