

Other Times and Other Peoples

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In 1874 and 1896, British military expeditions carted away artworks and other treasures from the Asante (or Ashanti) royal collections in Kumasi, Ghana. In an influential article, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes how Major Robert Baden-Powell (better known today as the founder of Scouting) praised his troops for undertaking the second raid ‘most honestly and well, without a single case of looting’.¹ As Appiah explains: ‘Baden-Powell clearly believed that the inventing and removal of these treasures under the orders of a British officer was a legitimate transfer of property. It wasn’t looting; it was collecting.’

In Baghdad, in 2003, it was left to local thieves to loot the National Museum of Iraq. Outside, however, one man did take a fancy to the fallen statue of Saddam Hussein: a former SAS soldier turned photojournalist removed one of the fallen dictator’s buttocks and took it away. Having returned to Britain, he ‘turned the chunk of statue into a piece of war relic art he hopes to sell to raise money for military charities and groups’. Members of the Iraqi government, however, have sought the return of ‘part of their historical and cultural heritage’.²

British expeditions into foreign countries; pieces of sculpture acquired and expatriated in war—one might readily conclude that not much has really changed. Or one might, if more optimistically minded, think that here we have evidence of progress, inasmuch as this time controversy has caught up with the expropriator. One might even take the gloomy view that standards have fallen since the days of Empire: Baden-Powell might well think it ‘looting’ for an individual ex-soldier to cart away a piece of statuary for ‘war relic art’. If there has been progress, it has involved learning to think about cultures and heritages and cultural relations in ways the Nineteenth Century did not; and this makes it harder to compare our era with the past.

It must have taken a particularly wilful blindness for Baden-Powell to think he was ‘pok[ing] about in a barbarian king’s palace’ when raiding the ‘barbarian’s’ art collection. Nevertheless, the political logic of what he was doing was by no means uniquely colonial. The confiscation of cultural treasures, not merely as spoils of war but as an exercise in imperial aesthetics, recalls French conquests in Europe barely a century before, when the Republic and then the Napoleonic Empire ‘retransplanted’ artworks to the Louvre and other collections.³ At first Napoleon’s troops were permitted to loot in lieu of pay; then they were stopped, and commanded to loot art for France.

Indeed, European cultural ideals had reached Asante before British soldiers did. Appiah draws attention to the historical irony that the assemblage of the royal collections in Kumasi had been inspired by reports of the British Museum: and so what was pillaged in 1874 was not only Ghanaian or African but ‘a collection that was, in fact, splendidly cosmopolitan’, composed of fine craftsmanship gathered from around the world. In this respect the Western political élite in London and the somewhat Westernised political élite in Kumasi shared some cultural background understanding of art collection and curation.

Saddam Hussein’s legacy in Iraq is not comparably cosmopolitan, despite the complicated international politics which surrounded his reign. Yet here, too, there is no simple clash of cultures or civilisations. Iraq remains a divided nation, with its origins not in voluntary union

¹ Appiah is quoting Baden-Powell’s *The Downfall of Prempeh: A Diary of Life with the Native Levy in Ashanti, 1895–96*, which can be read here: <http://pinetreeweb.com/bp-prempeh-00.htm>. All quotations from Appiah are from his article ‘Whose Culture Is it?’ (first published in the *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 9th February 2006).

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-22071942> (retrieved 30th May 2013).

³ As vividly described by Noah Charney in *Stealing the Mystic Lamb: The True Story of the World’s Most Coveted Masterpiece* (2010, New York: PublicAffairs), pp. 79–96.

or some visionary founding fathers, but in the British Mandate which the League of Nations invented when it divvied up the remains of the Ottoman Empire. Defending national heritage is part of what national governments are nowadays rightly expected to do;⁴ but the Iraqi government also has an interest in promoting a collective Iraqi identity among citizens who might develop other ideas—even if it has to appeal to the unhappiest of shared experiences in order to do so.

In the Victorian era, when Britain was only gradually developing ideals of conservation of her own material past, appeals to national heritages and nations' cultural treasures would have been only weakly intelligible. Now that sophisticated political and legal frameworks surround national and 'world' heritage, a world without them is less intelligible.

This too may indicate progress of a sort. 'Only in the late eighteenth century did Europeans begin to conceive the past as a different realm, not just another country but a congeries of foreign lands endowed with unique histories and personalities.'⁵ Though no doubt the exotica of foreign lands have always been enticing.

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⁴ For more on the politics of cultural heritage see my previous article, 'Motherlands and Museum Pieces': <http://goldenroom.co.uk/issue/march-2013/article/motherlands-and-museum-pieces>.

⁵ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985, New York: Cambridge University Press), p. xvi.