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That Belongs in a Museum

The Importance of Universal Museums

“Should they stay where they are – the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and elsewhere – exhibited and preserved with care, accessible to avid crowds of visitors from around the world? Or should they return to their countries of origin, whose demands for restitution have grown even more vociferous” (Waxman 3)? Sharon Waxman, the author of *Loot: The Battle Over the Stolen Treasures of the Ancient World*, tackles the controversial issue of modern museums with a transparent lens. Universal museums were needed for much of human history to separate the fragile artifacts we create with the human tendency of destruction and war.Universal museums have been crucial to the preservation and protection of antiquities and continue to provide education to broad audiences around the world.

Museums collect antiquities to provide crucial care that preserves and protects pieces of history that would otherwise be damaged or destroyed. “Western museums once could argue that they were necessary to protect ancient artifacts from being destroyed in the poor and unstable countries of their origin” (Waxman 5). Museums have acted as a sanctuary for most of the history of mankind. Today, they provide the highest quality of preservation techniques available. Artifacts arrive at museums for many different reasons: unsafe surroundings, not appropriate care, donations, purchases, and looting to name a few. Lord Elgin, a Scottish nobleman known primarily for the removal and transportation of the marble sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens, is a man who has sparked extreme controversial debates on the behavior of museums in the past, and how the modern world should move forward when dealing with antiquities. Lord Elgin removed, with local permission, the marble sculptures and moved them to the British Museum. At the time, there was no significant backlash. Centuries later, the citizens of Greece proclaim that these sculptures should be returned to their place of origin. “Lord Elgin did the world a great favor by removing the marbles because pollution and grime in Athens caused the deterioration of the marbles that remained” (Waxman 239). Due to the movement of these sculptures, they are in a condition that is much better than they would have been if they had remained in Greece. Examples have been seen around the world with many of the antiquities that have been gathered to preserve and protect over the years. Museums will be needed in the future to continue the preservation of antiquities that carry a physical reminder of the cultures we have come from. These antiquities also provide crucial education to audiences around the world.

Humans preserve history so that we can continuously relearn what we have endured to move forward from the mistakes we have made. Museums provide education to broad audiences around the world in order to educate the people of Earth on who we are, where we come from, and what we have done. “The British Museum was an argument for western humility. Here was the place any fourteen-year-old British lad could visit China or Tahiti while never leaving London. Here that young person could understand the western civilization was not the only culture in the world, or the best culture, and that it owed a debt to those who came before” (Waxman 211). The western world needs museums to understand where we fit in the world. Waxman continues the subject of the British Museum to illustrate the interconnectedness of civilizations over time: “it is to bring together representative pieces from different great civilizations that are usually considered in isolation” (Waxman 214). Antiquities have always been cared for, ensuring its survival through the years, but they are also respected and praised. “When it all sinks in, the visitor cannot help but be overwhelmed by the totality of this grandeur and by a sense of gratitude at the opportunity to see so much, so beautifully displayed” (Waxman 69). These experiences inspire the younger generation of the world to pursue education in history. Museums inspire more people to become involved in the preservation of what has made us human. “If we don’t understand the origins of human history, we are nowhere” (Waxman 372). To learn from the mistakes of mankind, we must understand what we have done. The physical reminder of antiquities through the course of human history does exactly that. Although the answer seems obvious, there are other factors at play that cause discrepancy in what seems right.

The countries of the modern world that have endured much of human history, like Egypt, Greece and Italy, have artifacts around the globe that are being asked to be returned to their place of origin. It is important to understand that museums have played a role in the preservation of antiquities since there were antiquities of importance. *Loot* brings forward the reminder of exactly how these museums came to acquire some of their collections. “Some, though not most, came from Napoleon’s expedition; much more came from the rapacious collectors in later decades who were working to dismantle monuments in Egypt as quickly as possible” (Waxman 71). Museums have made mistakes on when/where objects should be brought to their facilities to preserve and protect, and consequently, they have been ridiculed for those decisions. The descriptions in the Louvre, for example, sometimes do not show where the antiquity came from. “There is not a single word about how this remarkably important artifact came to be removed from its place of origin” (Waxman 75). Are museums trying to hide their mistakes to the public? Greece believes that the Parthenon marbles should all be returned to them. They believe that their antiquities belong to the people that made them. Waxman brings up an argument that should convince Greece to want the marbles around the world for people to see. “These objects are ambassadors. They inspire people to go and see other objects in the country” (Waxman 85). Antiquities are held across the world because it gives people of all backgrounds the opportunity to experience the culture of humanity. Should we take the route of returning human history to where it was created, we begin a cycle that would cause museums to become extinct. “If that’s the case, then we should put everything back in the tombs and leave it in the dark” (Waxman 85). What good would that do then? Would that fourteen-year-old British lad ever grow to understand that western civilization isn’t the only one, or even the best? Will he be able to experience and understand the interconnectedness of all people from all walks of life?

Universal museums have grown to be the foundation of preserving the history of the world. The presence of them is the reason why so many great antiquities are still in existence today. Museums continuously educate the citizens of the world to inspire the younger generation of historians. It ensures that the physical history we keep will let us move forward from the mistakes we have made. Antiquities belong around the world where they can be shown. “Who would be interested in Greek if it were all in Greece? The pieces are great because they are in the Louvre” (Waxman 65). Antiquities are the root of how cultures define themselves. They need to remain preserved and shown around the world to ensure a generation of citizens that think like cosmopolitans; that every culture has played a role in who we are and that all people deserve respect.

Works Cited

Waxman, Sharon. Loot: the Battle over the Stolen Treasures of the Ancient World. Times Books, 2009.