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The Humboldt Forum and the Morality of Museums

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The Humboldt Forum and the Morality of Museums

by

Kaitlin Marie Bryce

An Honors Capstone
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Diploma
to
The Honors College
of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

May 2, 2024

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Dedication

I would like to thank my project director, Dr. David Johnson for instructing me in German for three years and always provoking interesting discussions.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their continued support.

Abstract

The Humboldt Forum is a recently opened museum, laboratory, and event space that is located in the German city of Berlin. The Humboldt Forum is a partial recreation of an Imperial era palace that once stood upon the site the Humboldt Forum now occupies. Since the announcement of the project, the building of the Humboldt Forum has been controversial in Berlin and Germany at large. Much of the controversy stems from the artifacts in display inside of the Humboldt Forum, some of which were taken during Germany's colonial era. The controversy surrounding the Humboldt Forum represents a larger movement among academics and the public to no longer display artifacts taken by force from marginalized people or return said artifacts to the descendents of the people who created them. This controversy and some possible steps that could be taken to begin the process of righting historical wrongs will be explored in this project.

Introduction

Museums have existed in some capacity for thousands of years. The first known museum was established in 530 BCE by Princess Ennigaldi to showcase the history of the Mesopotamian region (Grande). Museums have likely existed around the world in some capacity ever since the first museum. In Western Europe and North America, museums began to be established in private homes to display the owner's collection of items in the early nineteenth century. By the mid nineteenth century large museums open to the public began to be established in Western Europe and North America (Chang). Many of these museums greatly expanded their collections during the colonial period, and many of the items obtained during this period were taken by force or under duress from the peoples being colonized. In recent years there has been a greater understanding of this fact by the public in Western countries and demands to return these artifacts to their countries of origin have increased (Downs). The Humboldt Forum in Berlin, Germany is a recently opened institution that has become a symbol of this rising controversy and movement.

Chapter 1: The Humboldt Forum

Located in the German city of Berlin, near an area of the city known as the “Museuminsel” or “Museum Island” in English, is a building known as the Humboldt Forum. The Humboldt Forum is a modern recreation of a destroyed Prussian palace formerly known as the Berlin Palace once owned by the former ruling family of Prussia, the Hohenzollerns. The Berlin Palace was heavily damaged in the Second World War and it was largely torn down by East German authorities in 1950. The space in which the Berlin palace occupied was replaced by a building called the “Palace of the Republic” in 1976 by the East German government. The “Palace of the Republic” was a multi use building that housed the East German Parliament and a leisure center open for all citizens that included a bowling alley, restaurant, and a dance hall.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, the Palace of the Republic was criticized by the German public and media both as a symbol of the decades that Germany spent divided into two nations and for being built with copious amounts of the harmful material, asbestos.

The recreated Berlin Palace was conceived as an idea by agricultural equipment merchant Wilhelm von Boddien, who spent decades researching the design and layout of the former Berlin Palace. Von Boddien also spent time collecting artifacts from the destroyed Berlin Palace from around the city. Von Boddien led the efforts in 1993 to place scaffolding around the Palace of the Republic that depicted the grand former Berlin Palace. Von Boddien and his organization’s efforts changed public perception of the use of the space occupied by the Palace of the Republic, and the German Bundestag voted in 2002 in favor of a plan that involved a partial recreation of the old Berlin Palace. Support however was weaker in the formerly East German states (DW Documentary).

The foundation stone of the modern Humboldt Forum was laid in 2013 and it was finally completed in 2020. The final project did not stay true to Von Boddien's original vision as the interior of the Humboldt forum was built in a modern style and the eastern portion of the exterior facade was also modernized.

However, the purpose of the building was initially unclear until Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, the former President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Center, one of the organizations involved in the reconstruction of the building, proposed using the building to house art. According to Lehmann, "There was a heated debate about the building of the palace but nobody thought about what should be inside it. In 2001 I got the idea to move the museums for non-European culture from the edge of the city from Dahlem into the heart of Berlin. That way world cultures could be seen as part of a larger context" (DW Documentary)." Lehmann's initial idea became a focus of the final building, which has spaces devoted to Asian art, exhibitions about the history of the city of Berlin, laboratories for Humboldt University, and space to host private events (DW Documentary).

The building of the Humboldt Forum cost a total of 680 million Euros (Wainright). The building project was never overly popular with the public, as even Wilhelm von Boddien, the man initially responsible for the rebuilding of the Berlin Palace, acknowledged. "[O]nly five percent of the public were in favor of the project, five percent of the public were opposed, and ninety percent had little opinion on the matter" (DW Documentary).

Yet, the most controversial element of the Humboldt Forum is the items contained inside, many of which are culturally priceless artifacts taken from around the world during Germany's colonial past. The building's facade was partially to blame. As museum curator Viola Koeinig of the Ethnological Museum, one of the museums providing materials to the Humboldt Forum,

stated, “For a long time we had hoped that we would have an empty white space. Outside was the palace facade and inside we just wanted a white cube but as planning progressed the palace took up more and more space” (DW Documentary). Koenig’s desire for a white space in which to display these artifacts was understandable. Using the environment of a lavish palace belonging to the family who had directed the colonial efforts of Germany’s past to house artifacts taken during that period could perhaps detract the attention of visitors from the items themselves and the context of how these artifacts came to be in Berlin.

One such item is a large outrigger boat from a South Pacific island known as Luf. The island of Luf began to be settled by European colonists in the early 1880’s and the local population of the island were resistant to the colonial advances of the Europeans. To quell the resistance, the German Navy launched attacks against the local population which caused a sharp decrease in the number of native inhabitants of the island due to a lack of shelter and disease. The large outrigger boat now housed in the Humboldt Forum was built originally by the remaining population of the island to be used in a funeral service for a leader of the island who perished after the attacks by the German Navy. The boat was never used for this purpose because in 1903 the boat was bought by a German man named Max Thiel who then sold the boat to the Museum für Völkerkunde, or Ethnological Museum in English, in Berlin. But there is very little documentation of the sale of the boat to Max Thiel, and the circumstances are still unknown (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin). Considering the fact that the boat was intended for use in a prominent member of a decimated community’s funeral, the circumstances surrounding the sale of the boat to an outsider may have been made under duress from the community or individuals.

Another such item is a throne known as the “Mandu Yenu” from the Kingdom of Bamum in what is now central Cameroon. The throne was allegedly given as a gift in 1908 to the German

Emperor Wilhelm II in 1908 by the King of Bamum, Ibrahim Njoya. The throne was given as a gift because imperial German soldiers had helped King Ibrahim Njoya invade the neighboring kingdom of Nso (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin). However, questions still remain about the legitimacy of this gift. The power imbalance between imperial Germany and the Kingdom of Bamum was vast and the gift may have actually been a tribute paid for the services of the German imperial military. Certainly the Mandu Yenu throne was valuable to the people of Bamum. The current Sultan of Bamum, the grandson of King Ibrahim Njoya, has stated that, “No day passes where we do not have to talk about the throne. The tourists that visit always ask what the throne of the King of Bamum is doing in Berlin. Some say the Germans stole the throne. Others think it wasn’t a gift or if it was, it was a forced gift” (DW Documentary).

A third such item in the collection of the Humboldt Forum are the Benin bronzes. The bronzes were looted from the Kingdom of Benin, located in what is now the state of Edo in Nigeria, by British soldiers in 1897. British soldiers attacked the royal palace of Benin in retaliation for the death of a British colonial official. The bronzes were taken in the course of the raid and spread across the world, with 530 of the bronzes ending up in the possession of institutions whose collections were integrated into the collection of the Humboldt Forum (Art Monthly).

The Humboldt Forum is a modern partial recreation of a once standing imperial palace in the center of the city of Berlin. Since its completion, the building has been criticized by academics such as Viola Koenig for architectural and stylistic choices made by the building’s creators. However, the Humboldt Forum also represents a wider topic currently being debated in public and academic circles, which is the display of cultural artifacts taken from marginalized people.

Chapter 2: Museums Around the World

The controversies of museums holding artifacts that may have been acquired under duress is not unique to the Humboldt Forum. Museums around the world have faced growing controversy from academics, the public, and outside groups to no longer display or entirely return items in their collections that were wrongly taken from marginalized groups from around the world.

The British Museum, one of the most famous museums in the world, has come under particular scrutiny for its collection of artifacts. The British Museum, like the Humboldt Forum, also has a collection of the Benin bronzes. The Benin bronzes are a collection of bronze images that illustrate the political and cultural history of the kingdom of Benin. The bronzes were taken from the kingdom of Benin in 1897 by the British colonial forces in retaliation for the death of a British official. Like the Humboldt Forum, the British Museum has faced pressure to return the stolen bronzes to the descendants of people of Benin (Rashba) . However, the British Museum has rejected the idea of returning the bronzes. According to Rashba (2022), “In 1980, Jean Rankine, the Deputy Director of The British Museum, stated that nothing in The British Museum was obtained illegally because the British were the legitimate authority in their colonies at the time. In this view, the Benin Bronzes were taken legally, and restitution would therefore be illegal” (Rashba). This perspective on the British Museum’s possession of the Benin bronzes is not shared by the people of Nigeria’s state of Edo, which is where the kingdom of Benin was once located. The people of Edo have campaigned for the British Museum to return the bronzes to their possession since the bronzes originally became a part of the British Museums collection, as many of them consider how the bronzes were acquired by the British to be immoral (Phillips).

Perhaps even more well known than the collection of Benin bronzes that the British Museum holds, are a collection of Greek marbles displayed in the British Museum known as the Elgin Marbles. The Elgin Marbles are a series of marble statues and pieces of the Acropolis, a collection of ancient temples and buildings located in Athens, Greece, that were taken by Lord Elgin who was the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1799-1803. Lord Elgin allegedly obtained a license from the Ottoman government, who at the time controlled the area that now includes the modern nation of Greece, to document the Acropolis and other ancient parts of the city of Athens. In order to preserve many of the marble statues and friezes that decorated the Acropolis from fire and looting, Lord Elgin had them removed from the Acropolis and sent to Britain for safekeeping (Downs). Yet, even in Britain the marbles were not safe from damage. The marbles were dirtied by the heating system used by the British Museum and the smog from the city of London over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Caretakers of the marbles in 1938 sought to clean the marbles by using soap mixed with acid to whiten the marbles, which greatly damaged the surface of the marbles. Even at the time this method of cleaning was controversial and the museum punished the caretakers responsible and ultimately decided to avoid calling attention to the damage by not making a public statement about the state of the marbles (Kehoe).

Museums outside of Europe have also faced similar controversies. The American Museum of Natural History has displayed a number of Native American artifacts in its collection over the decades, including a collection of artifacts of religious significance to the Apache tribe of the southwestern United States. The museum has claimed that all of the artifacts came into its possession legally a century before through a respected anthropologist named Pliny Earle Goddard who spent significant time living among the Apache. However, the Apache tribe have

disputed that these artifacts were taken from them in a legal manner. The tribe has sought the return of the items from The American Museum of Natural History and other museums around the country for decades. The American Museum of Natural History has begun the process to return the artifacts to the Apache tribe, however the museum has not chosen to classify the objects as being of religious significance as the Apache have wished. This failure to use the tribe's preferred category has led leadership of the Apache and other Native American tribes to feel that they cannot consciously accept the return of their cultural and religious artifacts until these items are given the respectful designations that are more respectful (Mashberg).

The Humboldt Forum in Berlin is not unique for inspiring controversy due to some of the items in its collection. Museums across the world, from the United Kingdom to the United States hold cultural artifacts that were taken from marginalized groups. The British Museum controversially holds both the collection of Greek marbles known as the Elgin Marbles and a collection of bronze figures from Nigeria called the Benin Bronzes, while American institutions like the American Museum of Natural History hold items from Native American tribes like the Apache.

Chapter 3: What Can be Done?

The possessions of cultural artifacts by an outside group acquired under dubiously legal or consensual circumstances remains a controversial issue. Demands are still being made around the world for museums to return items in their collections to the cultural and national groups where these items originate from.

Many prominent museums have rejected these demands for a variety of reasons, including the assertion that these items may not receive adequate care for conservation purposes

outside of the museum's supervision. While this claim is quite dismissive of the efforts of smaller local museums or concerned citizens, there is some merit to this claim.

The British Museum has explicitly refused to return the almost 1,000 individual Benin Bronzes in its collection because it has "...expressed that the return of these objects would lead to their destruction because of security and conservation concerns" (Rashba). In the case of the Benin bronzes, the British Museum is not entirely incorrect. There are storage facilities in Nigeria's capital city in Lagos and in Benin city for the government museums located in those cities, however the storage facilities are filled to capacity with other artifacts. And while there have been plans discussed, there has been very little progress on the completion of a new national museum in Nigeria's capital city of Abuja. There may simply be nowhere currently for the Benin Bronzes to be stored if and when they are returned to Nigeria. Yet, there are more established plans in place to build a museum called the Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin city to showcase the history of the Edo people. This proposed museum has attracted international cooperation and financial support, and may provide a safe place for the Bronzes to be conserved. (Phillips).

This proposed museum represents one possibility for the future of historical artifacts that have been repatriated to their country of origin. These artifacts could be displayed in such museums operated by the local residents of their origin, with the assistance of foreign museums and organizations to ensure the preservation of the artifacts. These newly established museums could prove to be successful, as a new museum was established on the grounds of the Acropolis in Athens and the museum received over 90,000 visitors in its first week of operation (Downs). The Elgin marbles taken from Athens in the early 18th-century still have not been returned to Greece, and the number of visitors to the Acropolis once the marbles have been returned could

possibly increase the number of visitors further. While it may perhaps decrease its overall number of visitors, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin has explored the idea of returning artifacts. Much of the collection of Benin Bronzes that the Humboldt Forum initially had in its collection have not been put on display and the process to return the bronzes to the Edo people in Nigeria is ongoing (Art Monthly).

Another possible future for the display of historical artifacts is to display replicas of artifacts. The Humboldt Forum in Berlin has explored this option of displaying artifacts. The Humboldt Forum has a recreation of a Buddhist cave temple in China known as “The Cave of the Ring Bearing Doves”. The recreation was built to emulate the feeling of the cave temple without damaging the cave itself (DW Documentary). The Humboldt Forum could further explore the use of recreated antiquities with one particularly controversial item, the “Mandu Yenu” throne from the kingdom of Bamum. After the throne came into the possession of the German Empire, the King of Bamum, Ibrahim Njoya had a recreation of the throne made. The recreated throne is still in the possession of the King’s descendents (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin). The copy of the throne could be given to the Humboldt Forum in exchange for the original. As a result of this exchange, the Humboldt Forum could continue to display a historically significant item, and the descendents of the King of Bamum could have the original Mandu Yenu in their possession again. This proposed method of display could still allow visitors of museums to appreciate and view each artifact. Artisans recreating the artifacts could attempt to use historically accurate methods and materials, which may provide insight for future research into the techniques and materials used in antiquity. The process of recreating these artifacts could be documented for the public and may also attract visitors to museums who are interested in learning more about historical artisanal techniques.

A third possibility for museums and cultural societies to explore for the continued display of controversial artifacts is employ artifacts as cultural ambassadors. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, a modern artist from Cameroon, advocates for this idea. According to Ndikung, “Let Germany send an important work from its culture to Cameroon as a cultural ambassador, and let's put it in the Foumban museum as well” (DW Documentary). This possibility may not prove to be a realistic avenue for the continued display of sensitive cultural artifacts because larger museums may not consent to the use of items from their collections in smaller museums that may not be able to provide the level of care a larger museum would.

Some artifacts have not been returned to their countries of origin due to security or conservation concerns. However, these items could be returned to be displayed in museums or institutions already established in the country of origin of the artifacts, or new institutions could be built. Controversial artifacts could also be removed from display and instead replaced with exact or nearly exact replicas. Cultural artifacts could also be used as “cultural ambassadors” through the exchange of artifacts across national borders to foster goodwill. Security or conservation may be valid reasons to not return artifacts, but other options could be explored.

Conclusion:

The Humboldt Forum in Berlin is a fitting illustration of many modern complaints about museums, and in particular museums in Western Europe and North America. The Humboldt Forum has been rebuilt, at least partially, in the style of a colonial era building and houses colonial era artifacts that were taken under dubious circumstances. The public funds used in the building of the Humboldt Forum could perhaps have been used for more practical purposes. Yet, the Humboldt Forum has taken steps to not remove original artifacts from their place of origin and still create displays for the public to experience these artifacts. The Humboldt Forum has also, perhaps more importantly, begun the process of repatriation for cultural artifacts taken under duress. In this respect, the Humboldt Forum could serve as a model for major museums around the world to display artifacts in good conscience.

This issue will likely remain an often discussed topic for decades to come. Museums across the United States will likely need to continue the process of no longer displaying and returning artifacts taken from Native peoples. The British Museum will also likely need to begin the process of more effectively accounting for the fact that many of the items in its collections were taken as a result of Britain's colonial past. There are options that institutions around the world could explore, including returning the items taken to local people and institutions in the artifacts country of origin, displaying replicas of artifacts, or exchanging artifacts as "cultural ambassadors". Whichever option museums around the world choose to explore, they should taken action to begin to right historical wrongs that continue into the present day.

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