
Reviewed by Melissa Eppihimer

In *The Brutish Museums,* Dan Hicks presses museums and collectors to return objects that were “taken,” as he insists, during the colonial era. Although his focus is on the brass plaques and sculptures, ivories, and other items looted by the British during the attack on Benin City in 1897, Hicks offers a broader indictment of the possession of colonial loot, which he regards as a perpetuation of colonial violence.

Chapters 1–7 introduce the “analytical tools and lenses” (p. 16) needed to excavate the bonds between anthropological and ethnographical collections and what Hicks calls corporate, extractive, and militarist colonialism (as opposed to settler colonialism). After proposing a theory of “taking” to counter existing theories of “giving,” Hicks rejects two common material culture studies frameworks that, he suggests, too often support museums’ retentionist policies: entanglement theory and object biography. He replaces them with necrography: a history of loss and death. Object necrographies expose how removing an object from its cultural context (and subsequently depositing it in a museum) is a final, destructive act. In the colonial era, such acts enabled white individuals, institutions, and governments to portrays non-white communities in Africa and elsewhere as archaic, primitive, and archaeological. This form of chronopolitics served, Hicks asserts, like the Maxim machine gun—as a weapon of war. Consequently, as long as colonial loot remains in collections, colonial violence endures.

In chapters 8–12, Hicks presents a new history of the attack on Benin City and details three kinds of horrors that are often missing from museum wall texts: democide, iconoclasm, and looting, all of which were codified as war crimes in the Hague Convention of 1899. The book frequently anticipates counterarguments, and here Hicks cites historical sources criticizing colonial violence as it was occurring. This heads off the critique that he is judging the past by the standards of the present. The level of historical detail in these chapters is somewhat unexpected, but it effectively proves Hicks’ point that museums have strategically overlooked, underestimated, or misconstrued how and why the British took loot from Benin City. The looting was not a spontaneous, protective measure undertaken during a punitive expedition in response to an unprovoked attack. It was a planned and operational component of a regime change that benefitted British corporate and national interests.

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Chapters 13–18 expose how museums (and the market that feeds them) were and still are party to colonial violence. The Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University is Hicks’ primary case study. Hicks is a curator at the museum, and he approaches the topic from this position of privilege (and, he adds, as a white man). Yet, as he and the pun in the book’s title remind us, other institutions have similar histories. Hicks also observes that the collaboration between museums and corporate-extractive-militarist colonialism has not disappeared. During the global “war on terror” and the purportedly punitive regime change in Iraq in 2003, he notes, cultural heritage became an instrument of soft power. Extending the comparison between Baghdad and Benin, Hicks describes British violence in Africa during the late nineteenth century as a “war on terror.”

*The Brutish Museums* is not an instruction manual for the process of restitution, but a moral argument for the premise of restitution. Hicks is careful to note that, just as colonialism is not strictly a project of the nation-state, the process of decolonizing museums is not strictly in the hands of nation-states. National and private institutions as well as individual collectors around the world hold objects looted from Benin City. (Likewise, representatives of the Nigerian national government and the Oba of Benin negotiate control over restituted Benin objects.) As such, the target audience for the book would seem to include museum leaders, government officials, and private collectors who have the ability and, Hicks argues, responsibility to return colonial loot. However, his dense but swift engagements with anthropological and sociological theory suggest that he is really targeting curators and scholars at institutions with colonial-era acquisitions. While restitution is the most consequential act they could support, Hicks envisions a complete revolution in anthropology and “world culture” museums that releases them from their colonial agendas and turns them into anti-colonial agents that preserve cultural memory.

One side effect of *The Brutish Museums*’ focus on current owners of the looted Benin objects is a noticeable absence of African perspectives on restitution. Hicks emphasizes his debt to African scholars like Achille Mbembe and student activists like those in South Africa who initiated the Rhodes Must Fall movement, and he acknowledges the long history of requests for restitution from the kingdom of Benin and Nigeria. However, the book misses an opportunity to highlight the voices and actions of Edo and Nigerian people who share his view that museums perpetuate colonial violence. As partners in the restitution and decolonization processes, their inclusion need not be the tokenism or co-option of labor that Hicks fears it might become.

*The Brutish Museums* contributes to a growing call for and, indeed, action towards restitution. In April 2021, Germany agreed to repatriate more than a thousand artefacts to Nigeria. In October 2021, the University of Aberdeen and Jesus College of Cambridge University transferred one object apiece to Nigeria. The
phenomenon is not unique to Benin City objects. Last November, France transferred to the nation of Benin 26 sculptures that French forces removed during an attack on the Kingdom of Dahomey in 1892. Are such returns the first cracks in the breaking of a dam, with a larger wave of restitutions to follow? Or will the return of these objects captured directly through colonial violence function as a pressure-release valve that allows other colonial acquisitions to remain in place? The Brutish Museums’ forceful exposure of the vileness of colonial campaigns in Africa will likely help speed up the restitution process for African loot, but it could paradoxically harden museums’ claims on material culture acquired through less directly violent means.

However, anyone adopting this view would have to ignore the central premise of this book: that an object taken under colonialism, regardless of the specific circumstances of its removal, is an object of colonial violence. Hicks’ deconstruction of the “universal museum” concept, the idea that certain self-identified institutions (all in the northern hemisphere, most in Europe and America) serve as repositories for the world’s cultural heritage, insists that restitution as a mode of decolonization should be widely applied. In the Afterword, Hicks counts seven different classes of colonial “taking” that must be undone. The first of these (looting) is defined by explicit violence, but others include modes of collecting that may not be directly associated with violence. Among the latter is archaeological collecting and tomb-raiding, which would include, for example, ancient objects discovered in Iraq during the British mandate and brought to London through a British designed and implemented system of partage. The necrography here would be quite different, since British colonialism mapped differently onto the bodies, landscapes, and cultures of ancient and modern Iraq. But The Brutish Museums emphasizes that the taking is still there, and the violence too.