

Art History and Repatriation

A Case of Mutual Illumination?

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Repatriation claims and restitutions show how deeply bound works of art can be with their locations and how they contribute to collective memory and identity. This stands in contradiction to the Modernist notion of the work of art as an autonomous entity, 'independent of time and place'.¹ The heuristic value of the repatriation issue for art history is typical of conflict situations, which bring to light competing claims and what they have in common.

The history of the making and preservation of artefacts, artworks and monuments is replete with instances of moving, transfer, spoliation, and to a lesser extent restitution. Imperial and colonial history is particularly rich in this regard, from the public display in Rome of the spoils from the Jerusalem Temple, depicted in 81 AD on the Arc of Titus, to the return to Ethiopia by the Italian government, in 2005, of the obelisk looted from Axum by Mussolini in 1937. These are acts of submission, of appropriation and of *translatio imperii*, claiming to take away more than the objects, the very place to which they belonged, or rather its status and aura. In 1204, the Venetians used the Fourth Crusade to challenge the predominance of Constantinople. They took away the bronze horses of the hippodrome, on which Emperor Theodosius had installed the obelisk found near Thebes by Constantine.² They also took part of the marble facing of Hagia Sophia to adorn their ducal chapel of San Marco. The horses travelled again when the Venetian Republic fell to Bonaparte, who endeavoured to demonstrate the superiority of Paris by having all conquered states and sister republics contribute to the Musée du Louvre, later Musée Napoléon.

Goethe noted in 1798 that these massive transfers, added to those prompted by archaeology, signalled a new epoch in the history of art education and of the enjoyment of art: henceforward, 'dislocation' would be the norm rather than the exception, and 'the place where works of art found

themselves' would play a diminished role.³ The theoreticians and supporters of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic *Kunstraub* justified their spoliations as 'repatriation'. The word seems paradoxical but is highly significant, all the more as it may have been the first time it was applied to artefacts. Since art was born of freedom, as Winckelmann had shown, and since Paris had become the *patrie de la liberté*, transferring the products of the arts there amounted to bringing them back home. Dissenting voices were heard, however, and the French theoretician Quatremère de Quincy objected that art lives from its *destination*, including location as well as use, so that displacing it really means destroying it. Quatremère pleaded for universal values that would not be imposed at the expense of others, writing that 'the riches of the arts and sciences are such because they belong to the whole universe; provided they be public and well preserved, what does it matter which country is their depository? It is but the custodian of my museum.'⁴

Quatremère was instrumental in organising the restitution of many looted objects after Napoleon's defeat, including the bronze horses, which were returned to Venice—but not to Istanbul. An anonymous lithograph (see figure 1) illuminates the significance given to these returns: it shows *The Martyrdom of Saint Peter* by Rubens preceded by a standard-bearer on horseback and followed by a long line of citizens winding through the streets of Cologne, with other spectators at their windows. Although this was a Catholic altar painting and the celebration resembles religious processions, it is mainly as a work of art and an icon of local identity that the picture was paraded through the city. Despite the political restorations following 1815, the process of secularisation, museumisation and nationalism launched by the Napoleonic wars proved irreversible, and many returned objects landed in museums rather than in their previous locations. In the nineteenth century, this process was extended worldwide by Western imperialism

and colonialism, resulting in the extraordinary concentration of artefacts that we know in European and North American collections and cities.

Yet another obelisk, for instance, was erected in 1836 on the Place de la Concorde in Paris (see figure 2). The reasons for this relocation have been analysed in detail by Todd Porterfield.⁵ The obelisk was taken from the Amon Temple in Luxor by the viceroy of Egypt Muhammed Ali who gave it to France in 1831 in exchange ‘for the seeds of a new civilization’, that is for French help in modernising and Westernising his country. In France, the obelisk was regarded as a belated war trophy in honour of Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign. Its antiquity made it a symbol of eternity, appealing to a regime anxious about its duration, and fit to occupy in a neutral way the politically loaded spot where Louis XVI and many others had been guillotined. The transfer was again stylised as an accomplishment of history, but in the name of progress rather than freedom: commentators argued that the splendour of Pharaonic Egypt, buried and degraded by the Muslim interlude, would be revived in the midst of modern Paris, and the minister Adolphe Thiers, referring to the expanding role of France in Algeria, declared that henceforth the French were ‘the authors, the fathers of Egyptian civilization’. These claims to continuity and replacement were expressed in the placement of the obelisk, with the side that had faced the Nile now facing the Seine, and in the gold-leaf decorations inscribed by the architect Jacques-Ignace Hittorff on the granite socle (see figure 3), which commemorate the event and celebrate the feat of engineering with diagrams of the machinery and methods used.

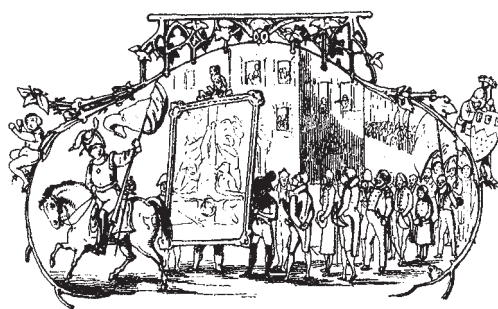


Figure 1 Unknown artist
The Return to Cologne of Peter Paul Rubens’s ‘The Martyrdom of Saint Peter’ (detail), 1837
 DIMENSIONS
 lithograph
 Collection of the Stadt Köln / Museum of the City of Cologne
 © Kölnisches Stadtmuseum

It is as a result of this history and of the continuing flow of illicit transfers that, in the wake of decolonisation, international efforts were made to revert this movement. UNESCO adopted in 1964 a Recommendation on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Export, Import and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which became a Convention in 1970 and led to the creation, ten years later, of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to

Figure 2 Jacques-Ignace Hittorff (architect)
 Place de la Concorde, Paris, 1833–34
 © Photograph Dario Gamboni
 Also shown is the obelisk from Luxor Temple, Egypt, dating from the thirteenth century BC.





Figure 3 Unknown artist
 Obelisk (from Luxor Temple, Egypt, thirteenth century BC),
 Place de la Concorde, Paris
 DIMENSIONS
 MEDIUM
 © Photograph Dario Gamboni
 Showing the east face of the socle by Hittorff bearing the
 inscription 'In the presence of the King Louis Philippe I this
 obelisk transported from Luxor to France was erected on
 this pedestal by Mr Lebas, engineer, to the applause of an
 immense crowd on 35 October 1836'.

its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation. The term 'repatriation', used for the return of refugees and soldiers to their homes, was applied to cultural artefacts as well as to human remains. The movement has been controversial, with opponents denouncing it as a counterproductive form of nationalism. But its promotion gained momentum at the end of the last century, with the reopening of many disputes resulting from World War II and with the signing in 1995 of the Unidroit Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. We are all aware of recent agreements such as the ones made in 2006 between the Italian government and, respectively, the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles; under their terms, Italy will provide the museums with long-term loans of antiquities comparable to the ones believed to have been looted and now returned. The heightened concern for provenance and awareness of repatriation claims also leads to

spontaneous, individual restitutions, such as that of a tribal headdress returned in 2003 by André Breton's daughter to the descendants of the Northwest Coast Indians from whom it had been confiscated in 1922 by the Canadian authorities. The headdress has been housed in Alert Bay in the museum of a cultural society called U'mista, literally 'the place of lost things', and in recognition of her gesture, Aube Breton-Elléouët was rechristened U'Ma, 'She who gives back'.⁶

This movement is part of a general 'return of the context' that can also be observed in the visual arts from the 1960s onwards. The Modernist ideals of 'sitelessness' and absolute autonomy were then rejected in favour of 'site-specificity' and 'relational art'. Suffice it to mention Richard Serra's opposition to the removal of his sculpture *Tilted Arc* from its intended Manhattan location in 1989, which he couched in terms similar to those of Quatremère de Quincy: 'To remove the work is to destroy the work.'⁷ Two years earlier, the Swiss Rémy Zaugg had contributed to the sculpture exhibition in Münster by repatriating two 1912 bronzes to their original location, arguing that the city had vandalised them by destroying their relation to their surroundings. In both cases, the artists understood 'context' in the phenomenological sense of spatial relationships, to the exclusion of the social and historical dimensions of *destination*; this is a shortcoming that came to haunt them and which later artists have attempted to address.

Even though Quatremère, Serra and Zaugg defined destination and context as consubstantial to the work of art, the history of spoliations, removals and restitutions shows that location is one of the properties of artefacts that can be modified or manipulated for political, religious, economic and sometimes aesthetic gain. Such modifications often happen in connection with interventions on other properties of the works and their context, including marks of appropriation, redefinitions of use, *damnatio memoriae* and even iconoclasm.

I have explained in my introduction how human remains can come to be regarded as artefacts like 'secret sacred objects'. There is, however, an aspect of the repatriation claims for such artefacts that is in contradiction with the basic requirements for objects of art and science expressed by Quatremère when he pleaded for maintaining artworks *in situ* 'provided they be public and well preserved': the intended outcome of such restitutions can be a restriction of access or even a destruction. A restricted access is thus intended for returned Ethiopian *tabots*, consecrated altar slabs meant to be viewed only by the clergy, and for headdresses from the Canadian Blood Tribe, which prohibits

replicas and photographs because it considers multiplication to be dangerous and offensive; ‘war gods’ of the Zuni in New Mexico, traditionally left in open shrines to decompose naturally, may meet this fate upon their return.⁸ The competition between cultic, aesthetic and scientific interaction with things that shaped the museum culture of the West is taking place again on the global scene, with consequences that go beyond the debate about the proper way—‘aesthetic’ or ‘anthropological’—of displaying artefacts.

Let me now come back to the question of how art history is concerned by the issue of repatriation. A first answer deals with historiography, self-reflection and self-criticism. The birth and development of our discipline are bound with the constitution of collections and museums and thus with the ‘dislocation’ noted by Goethe, which not only transferred objects but also claimed a universal value for the cult of art and heritage. The relative independence from destination gained in the process, which led to the Modernist ideal of sitelessness and absolute autonomy, justified the ambition of curators and historians to become the legitimate custodians and interpreters of the world heritage. On the other hand, art history also participated in the ways in which art was made to contribute to collective identities, on the various and sometimes conflicting levels of city, region, nation, empire, culture, and world. In our field, the ‘return of the context’ is apparent in the development of approaches such as the social history of art, the history of collections, museums and display, the geography of art, and the dialogue with disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. The interest of the questions raised by repatriation claims in this historiographical and methodological context need not be emphasised.

I would like to add, however, that contextual approaches and attributions of location and identity should be assessed as critically as claims for autonomy. Traditions keep being invented and the exemption from history, which had been assigned to ‘primitive’ societies by their Western commentators, should not turn from a deprivation into a privilege. The positive value of secularisation, relative autonomy and universalism is put in relief by the instrumentalisation of heritage inherent in recent actions such as the claiming of Iranian antiquities in the collections of US museums by victims of Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel, or the claims made by pagan revival groups on ancient temple sites and artefacts from museums in Greece.⁹ The latter case also raises the issue of what the irreversibility of history means for actions of reparation such as ‘repatriation’. There is, in

fact, no such thing as a return to the *status quo ante*: whatever returns is not the same as what was taken away, and the destination to which it returns has generally changed in most if not all aspects. The restitutions made by France after 1815 are emblematic in that respect, since the returned works tended to be housed in museums created after the French model. The responsibility of art history is crucial here, for it is instrumental in transforming artefacts into works of art and cultural heritage as such. The claim made by Thiers that the French had become the ‘fathers of Egyptian civilization’ contains in this sense an element of truth, albeit with a grain of salt.

I have already started to show what the debate about repatriation can learn from the history of art and will now briefly expand on this. The history of art shows that the actual links between given objects, on the one hand, and sites, communities and uses, on the other hand, are always historical. Rather than being natural, essential and definitive, they represent moments in series of transformations—which does not mean that all links are equal or that all moments are equally desirable or regrettable.

At this preliminary stage, it seems to me that what the repatriation issue and art history can teach each other are the value, the difficulties and the resources of complexity. Let me conclude with a last look at the Paris obelisk from Luxor. Among the commentators of its transfer, the French poet Théophile Gautier seems to be the only one to have taken advantage of the fact that this obelisk was one of a pair and that its pendent had remained *in situ* so as to confront two situations, before and after, *in patria* and *ex patria*. He wrote in 1851 a poem in two parts entitled *Nostalgies d’obélisques* in which the two obelisks speak.¹⁰ The Paris obelisk complains first that it was degraded from the role of sentry to that of toy, of *bochet*. It has exchanged the holy Nile for the polluted Seine and the company of priests for that of prostitutes. It weeps and wishes it was back in Egypt. The obelisk in Luxor complains then about its solitude and the boredom of immobility. It dreams of joining in Paris its ‘brother’, which, although cut from the same quarry, must feel younger in the midst of the bustling city:

*Des veines roses de Syène
Comme moi cependant il sort,
Mais je reste à ma place ancienne;
Il est vivant et je suis mort!*

Let us note that when using the poetic trope of *prosopopeia* and letting his obelisks speak, Gautier only did more explicitly what we all do when we

claim to know where a cultural artefact should be or go. By giving the last word to the Luxor obelisk longing for Paris, the poet seems to favour his city and to agree with his compatriots for whom life had moved from ancient Egypt to modern France. Yet the statement 'I am dead' is contradicted by its very utterance, and if Gautier was taking sides for the transfer, he would let the Paris obelisk express joy. *Nostalgies d'obélisques*, instead, is a diptych of crossed and reciprocal longings, staging the symmetry of what the Germans respectively call *Heimweh* and *Fernweh*, the desire to be home and the desire to be away. For Gautier, therefore, transfer does not lead to a new stability: on the contrary, there is no 'natural', no fatal site any more but only exile, including in one's own country. Ambivalence appears to be the condition of obelisks in an era of 'dislocations': each of them complains about its own condition but knows about the other one's happiness.

NOTES

- 1 Dario Gamboni, "'Independent of time and place": On the Rise and Decline of a Modernist Ideal', in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann (ed.), *Time and Space: The Geohistory of Art, Ashgate*, Williston, VT, 2005, pp. 173–201.
- 2 André Corboz, 'Walks around the Horses', *Oppositions*, no. 25, Fall 1982, pp. 84–101.
- 3 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Einleitung in die Propyläen', *Propyläen*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1798, p. 1.
- 4 Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art, suivi de Lettres sur l'enlèvement des ouvrages de l'art antique à Athènes et à Rome*, Macula, Paris, 1989, p. 123.
- 5 Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism 1798–1856*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, pp. 13–41, 156–70.
- 6 *Art Newspaper*, no. 141, November 2003.
- 7 Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, (eds), *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1991, p. 38.
- 8 Martin Bailey, 'Holy tabots to be transferred from British Museum to Ethiopian church', *Art Newspaper*, no. 157, April 2005, p. 24; see also Charlotte Woodhead, 'That's Not Just a Work of Art—That's Our Godhead', *Art Newspaper*, no. 149, July–August 2004, p. 25.
- 9 Martha Lufkin, 'Iran Responds to Claim for Persian Antiquities in US Museums', *Art Newspaper*, no. 172, September 2006, p. 12; see also LH, 'Pagans Triumph in Greece', *Art Newspaper*, no. 169, May 2006, p. 1.
- 10 Théophile Gautier, 'Nostalgies d'obélisques', *Emaux et camées*, Charpentier, Paris, 1918, pp. 65–74; see also Porterfield, p. 162, n. 20; and Nichola A Haxell, 'Hugo, Gautier and the Obelisk of Louxor (Place de la Concorde) During the Second Republic', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 18, nos 1 and 2, Fall–Winter 1990, pp. 65–77.