

Imagine for a moment the following scenario: Canada has been invaded and taken over by a foreign power; to add insult to injury, the occupiers allow foreign private collectors and foreign museums to ransack our cultural heritage by removing paintings, wood carvings, sculpture, ceramics and other such artefacts from Canadian soil for their own benefit. Would we as Canadians - once delivered from our conquerors - not want to regain our national treasures?

The scene now shifts to Greece. It is well known that Greece was plundered of much of its artistic heritage while under foreign occupation from 1453 to 1821 A.D. One has only to think of the famous "Elgin Marbles" (the sculptures of the Parthenon) now in the British Museum, far from their original home in Athens. In fact, since the coming to power of the Papandreou government in Greece, there has been increasing pressure (exerted mainly by the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri) on Great Britain to return these treasures to Greece - countered by firm refusal to do so by the Thatcher government. The situation seems at present a stalemate, but it remains a good example of a larger problem involving all of the great museums of Europe and North America.

Today, most countries have stringent rules preventing the export of national treasures. Many an "innocent" tourist has run into serious difficulties trying to leave Peru with a piece of Inca pottery, or Italy with a "few souvenirs" from Pompeii. But every archaeologist knows the "rules" and agrees to abide by them: thou shalt not remove artefacts from their country of origin unless special permission has been granted by the government of that country. But such a solution, of course, does not apply to those artefacts removed in the distant past.

Should such treasures be "repatriated"? Imagine next the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto being stripped of its international collections and thus transformed into a showplace of Canadian art and artefacts in splendid isolation. I would suggest that most Canadians would view this as a loss, no matter how fierce their pride in the Canadian achievement. And so the British resist the "stripping" of the British Museum, and the French resist the stripping of the Louvre, etc. In the eyes of such institutions, their treasures belong to the "world at large" and, brought together under a single roof, offer the visitor a vast cultural panorama.

Is there any solution? Are the "nationalists" right to demand their treasures back? Or, are the museums right in their quest to create in one place a cross-section of our human heritage? The problem, of course, is that both sides have valid points to make.

Every reader will have his/her opinion on what should be done, but I feel bold enough to voice my opinion, if only to stir up the debate. In the specific case of the Elgin Marbles, the British Museum ought to negotiate an eventual return of the sculptures to Greece; perhaps an agreement could be worked out whereby Britain would retain these treasures for another 20 years or so (a transitional period of sorts), and then return them graciously to Athens. Indeed, it may be desirable for every major museum to review its collections and negotiate (under UN supervision?) the return of extraordinary artefacts taken illicitly from their homeland. I say "extraordinary artefacts" because I doubt that every country of origin would demand every pot, every carving back; the Athens National Museum, for example, already has more pots than it can ever display! We need to focus attention on the truly special works of art.

Any museum director will naturally dislike my suggestion, and I myself would certainly dislike losing access to some of the treasures in the R.O.M, for example. But we need to recognize the larger, moral issue involved - one that collecting nations must tackle in order to redress the looting of those who have been victimized in the past. If Hong Kong can be returned to China, then the Elgin Marbles can be returned to Greece.