

## BP or not BP?

### British Museum closes Africa Gallery in response to our protest tour

Posted on August 14, 2021August 27, 2021 by bpornotbp



Unofficial tour guides descended on the British Museum today at 2pm, urging the museum to repatriate objects acquired through colonialism and to end its long-standing partnership with the oil giant BP [1]. The event was publicly announced in advance, and included a call for the return of the Benin Bronzes housed in the museum. In response, the British Museum closed the Africa Gallery, preventing tour speakers – including speakers of Nigerian and Caribbean descent – from presenting the case for repatriation in front of the Bronzes.

The full film of the event can be viewed here:

## The 'Striking Back At The Empire' Tour



The British Museum claims that today's closure of the gallery containing the Bronzes was due to concerns about visitor numbers. However, the museum was only allowing entry to visitors with pre-booked tickets, meaning the museum was in full control of visitor numbers on the day without needing to close any galleries. The tour organisers had also informed the museum in advance that only a small number of people would attend in person. Organisers therefore believe that the museum management was instead attempting to reduce the impact of critical voices challenging its controversial refusal to return contested African artefacts. Pressure has been building on the British Museum to return objects stolen by the British Empire, as growing numbers of other European and American museums have agreed to repatriate colonially-looted items [4].

The protest tour, entitled '*The Striking Back at the Empire Tour*', was organised by the performance activist troupe *BP or not BP?* [2]. Despite the closure of the Africa Gallery, the tour went ahead as planned. The group had already pre-recorded a talk inside the Gallery in front of the Benin Bronzes the previous day, so were able to show that to viewers on the livestream in addition to live talks from other spaces inside the museum.

Talks and films from Nigerian, Iranian, Caribbean and Greek campaigners – including arts and culture sector workers – made connections between the legacy of the British Empire, calls for repatriation of stolen artefacts and the museum's fossil fuel sponsorship. More than **350 people** joined the tour live online, streamed directly from the British Museum. While tour guides and speakers presented from inside the museum itself, the audience were asked not to attend in person for reasons of COVID-19 safety. The tour captured the attention of visitors who stopped to listen. Security staff also watched without interrupting the tour.

**Onyekachi Wambu, from the African Foundation for Development and the Return of the Icons Project**, spoke on the tour about the Benin Bronzes and human remains still held in the British Museum. He said:

*'When you come in and you look at these artefacts, what strikes you immediately is that they are trophies. There's a whole framework of injustice that needs to be corrected.'*

*The museum says they can't return these objects because there is a law in place preventing them, that applies to the British Museum, the British Library and the V&A. However, we do know the law has been changed to return looted Nazi artefacts, so it's not beyond the bounds of creativity to make the conditions for the return of African artefacts.'*

## Onyekachi Wambu - Return Of The Icons



**Zita Holbourne, who is the joint National Chair of Artists' Union England**, a multi-disciplinary artist/curator and the National Vice President of the PCS Union which represents thousands of museum and gallery workers, spoke in the Great Court as part of the tour. She said:

*'Part of our tour is supposed to take in the Africa galleries but because they knew that we were coming, the British Museum closed the Africa galleries. The irony of people from the African diaspora coming here to speak about our history and how that's impacted us to the current day being denied access to those galleries that actually house the artefacts taken from our ancestors is pretty shocking.'*

*If this institution is really serious about being with Black Lives Matter "in spirit and in soul", as they have said publicly, then they really need to sit down, examine themselves and be truthful about what they're doing.'*

## Zita Holbourne – The British Museum - Colonialis...



The tour also featured Iranian artist Mona M, speaking about the UK and US-led coup d'état in Iran, and the involvement of the Anglo-Persian oil company (which is now BP).

Oil industry sponsorship of UK museums has already been in the spotlight this month, with the Science Museum facing a major backlash over signing a gagging clause that prevents any criticism of its sponsor Shell [5]. Campaigners are concerned that the British Museum may have signed a similar gagging clause as part of its sponsorship deal with BP, noting that the museum's management have gone out of their way to publicly defend the oil company on multiple occasions [6].

**Danny from BP or not BP?**, who also spoke on the tour, said:

*'From the proposed Burrup Hub gas project in Australia, to drilling in the Russian Arctic, BP's business plan completely contradicts what we need to do to avoid the terrifying climate scenarios laid out in this week's IPCC report. In order to get away with this, BP uses cultural sponsorship to make itself look like an acceptable part of society and give it a social license to operate. The British Museum also gives BP access to power at the highest level. BP specifically sponsors exhibitions that allow it to throw launch parties and invite representatives of the exact governments that it is trying to lobby for more drilling rights, from Russia to Egypt to Iraq.'*

The British Museum and Science Museum are two of the very few remaining UK cultural institutions with oil company partnerships. Tate, the Edinburgh International Festival, the National Gallery, the Edinburgh Science Festival, National Galleries Scotland, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, the British Film Institute and the Southbank Centre have all ended their relationships with oil companies in the last five years [7].

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Notes:

[1] The speakers on the tour were:

**Zita Holbourne**, National Vice President of PCS Union, National co-chair of Artists' Union England, National Chair of BARAC UK (Black Activists Rising Against Cuts)

**Mona M.**, Iranian visual artist and researcher

**Onyekachi Wambu**, Project Director of the Return of the Icons programme, African Foundation for Development (AFFORD)

**BP or not BP?**, activist theatre group

**Hellena**, Greek singer-songwriter ([hellenaofficial.com](http://hellenaofficial.com) ([https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fhellenaofficial.com%2F%3Ffbclid%3DIwAR0oGE8pA7KL9FND5q51iw9zAJk30nlWXhuBw64oXEKeA5IofS0yZekf7g&h=AT1dbeey0LCEthViaBKFgdTF10hAAMSftQFP0ivU2en7p8gLkzOX62aYT3d3w4oIIR-d6usT7WRi2PFuMyZQKcN8QPU0jwO5yBfevwCmpzATKabebeoQhdugWCU1kHSi&tn=q&c\[0\]=AT1Rik6qqFQUNW9LRI6PTbtB5HTGdBdZHCWGYkUrUv8coiQyBR8vN2cET16dg0IOWQwFHFlqK6zMWn8XP4HCVP6SbtzRLLebGpoQIU6rtibzbqZ1g5Pp6Hg\\_ekKH\\_CilUj2fthBBkLdbPjkn5kfyCwC2sJzdUgFEYZQ-QgCDeRVc4N6j9Q](https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fhellenaofficial.com%2F%3Ffbclid%3DIwAR0oGE8pA7KL9FND5q51iw9zAJk30nlWXhuBw64oXEKeA5IofS0yZekf7g&h=AT1dbeey0LCEthViaBKFgdTF10hAAMSftQFP0ivU2en7p8gLkzOX62aYT3d3w4oIIR-d6usT7WRi2PFuMyZQKcN8QPU0jwO5yBfevwCmpzATKabebeoQhdugWCU1kHSi&tn=q&c[0]=AT1Rik6qqFQUNW9LRI6PTbtB5HTGdBdZHCWGYkUrUv8coiQyBR8vN2cET16dg0IOWQwFHFlqK6zMWn8XP4HCVP6SbtzRLLebGpoQIU6rtibzbqZ1g5Pp6Hg_ekKH_CilUj2fthBBkLdbPjkn5kfyCwC2sJzdUgFEYZQ-QgCDeRVc4N6j9Q)))

[2] *BP or not BP?* create performances without permission inside oil-sponsored cultural spaces. Since 2012, they have held over 60 protest performances, over half of which have been in the British Museum. See [bp-or-not-bp.org/performances-and-films](http://bp-or-not-bp.org/performances-and-films)

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/feb/07/climate-activists-bring-trojan-horse-to-british-museum> (<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/feb/07/climate-activists-bring-trojan-horse-to-british-museum>).

[4] See for example <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/benin-bronzes-british-museum-culture-wars-george-osborne-chair-nigeria-history-1116173> (<https://inews.co.uk/news/world/benin-bronzes-british-museum-culture-wars-george-osborne-chair-nigeria-history-1116173>).

[5] <https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-science-museum-signed-gagging-clause-with-exhibition-sponsor-shell> (<https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-science-museum-signed-gagging-clause-with-exhibition-sponsor-shell>).

[6] See for example <https://www.desmog.com/2019/07/22/comment-british-museum-s-bp-cheerleading-shows-why-big-oil-loves-arts-sponsorship/> (<https://www.desmog.com/2019/07/22/comment-british-museum-s-bp-cheerleading-shows-why-big-oil-loves-arts-sponsorship/>) and <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/british-museum-director-endorses-controversial-sponsor-bp-as-part-of-future-vision> (<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/british-museum-director-endorses-controversial-sponsor-bp-as-part-of-future-vision>) and <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/07/16/british-museum-trustee-quits-bp-sponsorship-immovability-looted/> (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/07/16/british-museum-trustee-quits-bp-sponsorship-immovability-looted/>).

[7] <https://cultureunstained.org/successes-for-the-movement/> (<https://cultureunstained.org/successes-for-the-movement/>).

# One thought on “British Museum closes Africa Gallery in response to our protest tour”

1. *Dr. Kwame Opoku.* says: [August 15, 2021 at 6:25 pm](#)

PLEASE LOOK AT MY ARTICLES ON THE QUESTION WHETHER THE BRITISH MUSEUM IS PREVENTED BY THE BRITISH MUSEUM ACT 1963 FROM RETURNING ARTEFACTS.THE 1963 ACT ALOWS THEM TO DO SO UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS. THE BM IS READING ITS POLICY INTO THE ACT.ASK ANY LAW STUDENT TO READ YOU SECTION5 OFTHE ACT.  
KWAME OPOKU

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