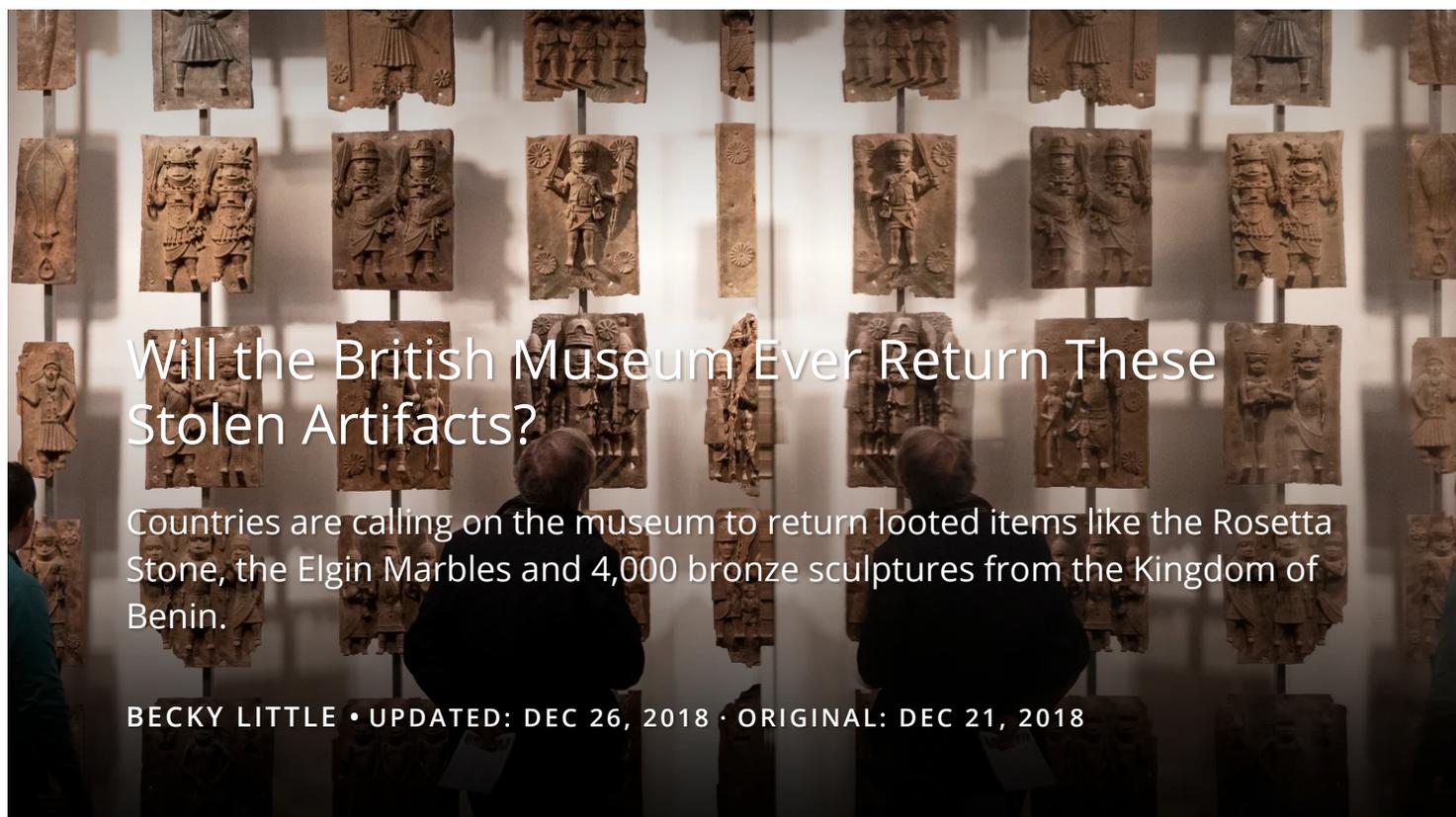




## HISTORY STORIES



### Will the British Museum Ever Return These Stolen Artifacts?

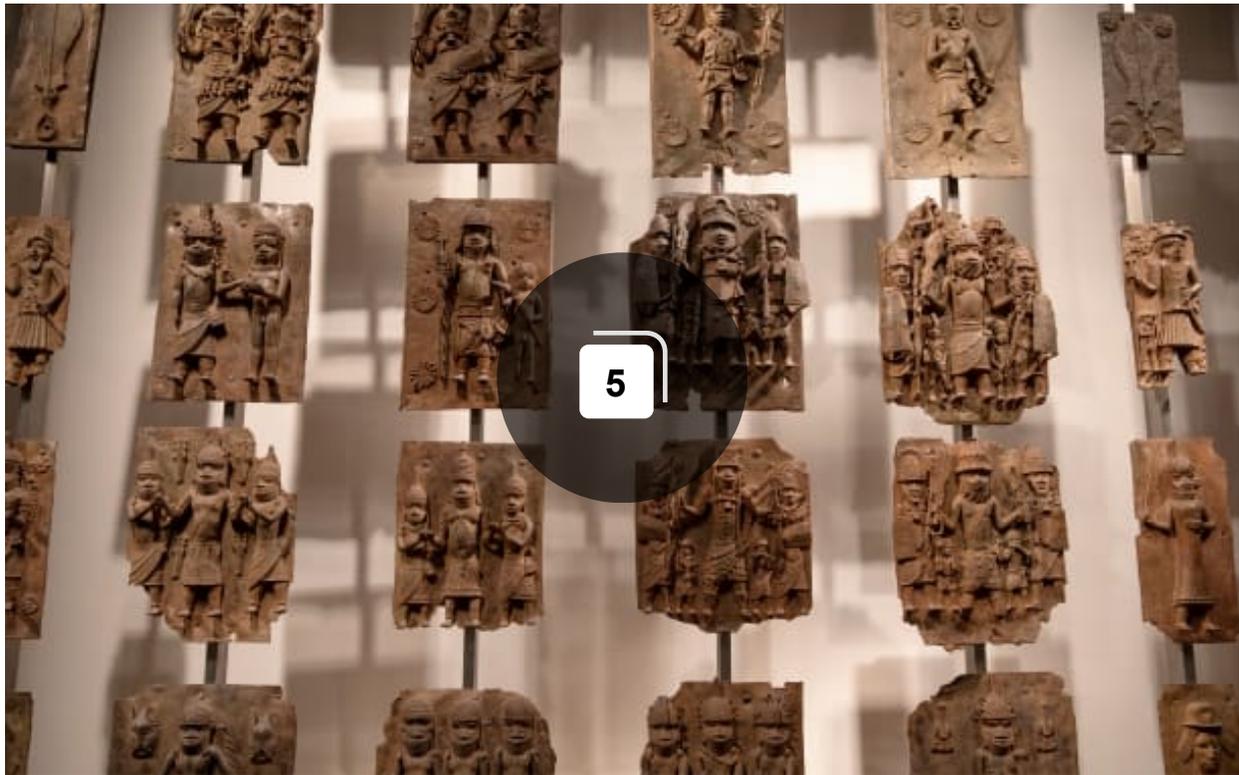
Countries are calling on the museum to return looted items like the Rosetta Stone, the Elgin Marbles and 4,000 bronze sculptures from the Kingdom of Benin.

BECKY LITTLE • UPDATED: DEC 26, 2018 • ORIGINAL: DEC 21, 2018

*Dan Kitwood/Getty Images*

What happens when a large portion of your country's archaeological treasures are "owned" by another country that stole them? That's the position non-western nations around the world find themselves in, with most of their cultural heritage residing in European and U.S. museums—but especially London's [British Museum](#).

Take Nigeria, for example. In 1897, British troops stole some 4,000 sculptures after invading the Kingdom of Benin (now southwestern Nigeria). Over a century later, surviving bronzes are on display [at museums](#) in the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria and the United States, but not in Nigeria, their country of origin. The 2018 film *Black Panther* [nodded to this issue](#) during a heist scene set in the fictional "Museum of Great Britain" where characters reclaimed artifacts stolen from the African country of Wakanda (also fictional).



**GALLERY**

**5 IMAGES**

Nigeria has been asking the U.K. to return its Benin bronzes for decades, and in late 2018, the countries struck a deal in which the British Museum will send some bronzes to Nigeria for the Royal Museum the country plans to open in 2021. But crucially, the British Museum says [it is only loaning the sculptures](#)—it still expects Nigeria to return the goods that Britain stole.

Around the same time as the British Museum announced that it will loan Nigeria its own artifacts, a protest theatre group called [“BP Or Not BP?”](#) organized a [“Stolen Goods Tour”](#) at the British Museum. The tour highlighted artifacts like the Gwaegal shield, which the British stole from Aboriginal Australians in the late 18th century. Similarly to the Benin bronzes, the British Museum refused to repatriate the Gwaegal shield to Australia for a 2016 museum exhibit. Instead, the British Museum loaned the shield and reclaimed it afterward.

### Recommended for you



5 Myths About  
Slavery

9 Unexpected  
Things Navy SEALs

## Hitler's Teeth Reveal Nazi Dictator's Cause of Death

JEWELRY

THINGS NAVY SEALS

## Discovered in Osama bin Laden's Compound

The list of stolen artifacts the British Museum refuses to give up goes on and on. Egypt wants its Rosetta Stone back and [Easter Island has asked](#) the museum to return its Moai head statue. [Even Greece](#), a fellow member of the E.U., wants the museum to return some Parthenon marbles that are often called the "Elgin marbles" after the Scottish nobleman who took them.

Of all the European countries with stolen artifacts, France has been [the most responsive](#) to calls for repatriation. French President Emmanuel Macron has announced that the Quai Branly Museum in Paris will return 26 stolen objects to the country of Benin (not to be confused with Nigeria's former Kingdom of Benin). He has also said he wants to change French law so that France must return stolen objects whenever a country asks for them back.

In contrast, the British Museum has specifically said that it has no plans to repatriate stolen artifacts. In response to the Quai Branly Museum's return of 26 items, British Museum Director Hartwig Fischer [told \*The New York Times\*](#) that "the collections have to be preserved as whole." The pressure to return them, however, will likely continue.

**FACT CHECK:** *We strive for accuracy and fairness. But if you see something that doesn't look right, [click here](#) to contact us! HISTORY reviews and updates its content regularly to ensure it is complete and accurate.*

### RELATED CONTENT