

## 11 requests in 11 years but no returns: the British Museum lacks transparency when it comes to contested items

*The British Museum has long faced criticism for displaying contested artefacts, such as the Parthenon Marbles from Greece. But now it's become clear that the list of artefacts requested for return by their countries of origin is longer than previously thought. And the museum has failed to highlight the history of some of these items.*



*The British Museum. Photo credit: Meike Eijsberg*

One of the most popular artefacts in the British Museum is Hoa Hakananai'a, a Moai statue from Easter Island. At 2.42 meters, it towers over all the visitors that enter display room 24. A small information plaque in front of the statue tells the visitor how it was created and how important it was (and still is) to the Islanders across Polynesia.

But not many people notice the second plaque on the other side of the statue. This one tells the story of how Hoa Hakananai'a was brought to Britain, and about the request for the permanent return of the statue, submitted in October 2018. It is accompanied by a photo of a Rapa Nui delegation who travelled to the museum to present offerings to Hoa Hakananai'a, some of which are still on display.

The rest of the information is vague and doesn't provide a clear reason as to *why* the people of Rapa Nui have requested the return of this statue – and why the British Museum has refused this. But what is known now, owing to a Freedom of Information request, is that Hoa Hakananai'a is not the only artefact requested to be returned. A fact the British Museum isn't always transparent about.



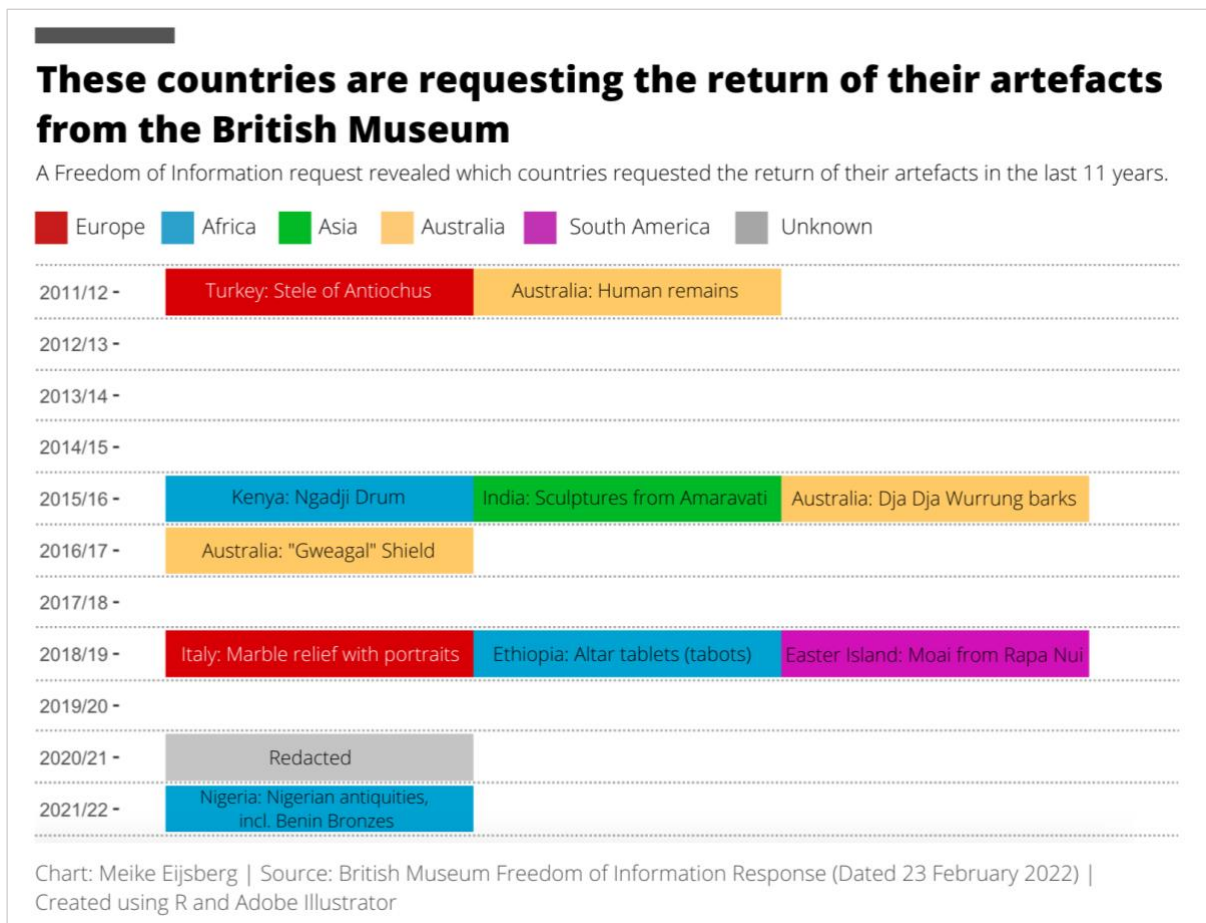
*Hoa Hakananai'a, a Moai statue from Easter Island. Illustration credit: Meike Eijsberg*

The British Museum has received 11 requests for repatriation since 2011. The requests come from various countries and feature many well-known artefacts such as Hoa Hakananai'a, the Amaravati Sculptures from India, and the Benin Bronzes from Nigeria.

This information comes at a time when Western museums are facing increasing pressure to be more transparent about the origin of their collection – and to return foreign treasures.

The British Museum’s latest request for return came from Nigeria in October 2021. They demand the return of the [Benin Bronzes](#), a collection of artefacts looted by British forces during colonial times. Although these were subsequently sold to museums all over Europe and North America, the single largest collection of Benin Bronzes (more than 900) resides in the British Museum.

Some museums have agreed to send back the bronzes – such as the [Quai Branly museum in France](#) and [Berlin’s Ethnological Museum in Germany](#). In March 2021, the University of Aberdeen [became the first British institution](#) to return one of these bronzes. Cambridge University followed suit and, more recently, Glasgow City Council [voted to return](#) 17 Benin Bronzes from the city’s museum collections to Nigeria – one of the largest repatriation agreements approved by a British institution. The pressure is now on the British Museum to do the same – for the Benin Bronzes, and for other artefacts.



Most requests come from governments (or their representative bodies), representatives of indigenous peoples and cultural institutions, and are always publicly made. In December 2020, however, one State (the identity of which has been redacted) chose not to communicate publicly with the British Museum but instead used confidential diplomatic channels and made contact via the British Government.

According to the British Museum, which stated its reason for redacting this item and State in the Freedom of Information response, “there is an expectation on their part that such communications will be treated confidentially.” They also added that, if the Museum were to release this information, “it would have a detrimental effect on its relationship with the State in question at a time when communications are ongoing.”

### **Restrictive laws**

It's not likely that the identity of this item and State will be made public until the negotiations are finished. But even then, the item in question will probably not be returned – at least not permanently.

Any decisions about releasing items from the British Museum’s collection are made by the Board of Trustees who will consult [The British Museum Act of 1963](#). This government act prevents the British Museum from returning objects and stipulates that the Trustees may only “sell, exchange, give away or otherwise dispose of any object” if it’s: a) a copy of another object; b) if the object was created after 1850 and can easily be copied using photography or “a process akin to photography”; or c) if it’s simply deemed “unfit to be retained,” in which case the Trustees also have the power to destroy the object.

Alice Procter, art historian and author of the book ‘The Whole Picture: The colonial story of the art in our museums & why we need to talk about it’, thinks change is needed. “This is a really critical time for museums to work out where they stand on these questions,” Procter told [the Guardian](#). “They have little justification for continuing to cite something like the British Museum Act.”

In 2018, Procter’s ‘[Uncomfortable Art Tours](#)’ around London’s museums – including the British Museum – made headlines for their attempt to expose the role of colonialism. “I run these unauthorised events in an attempt to fill in the gaps the museums refuse to acknowledge,” Procter [wrote](#). “When they don’t address the theft and imperial legacies that created their collections, someone has to step up and provide that information.”

In October of that year, the British Museum responded to these tours by setting up ‘Collected Histories’ talks to counter the perception that its collections only include looted treasures. The organiser of the talks, Dr Sushma Jansari, [was quoted as saying](#) that “We’re trying to reset the balance a little bit. A lot of our collections are not from a colonial context; not everything here was acquired by Europeans by looting.”

According to Jansari, a lot of research is conducted into the provenance of contested items and that these talks were an attempt to make that research public. However, the ‘Collecting Histories’ talks now seem to have been discontinued. And the artefacts that sparked the debate, those that were requested for return, have not been returned.



## Contested colonial items

The British Museum has a page on its website dedicated to '[contested objects from the collection](#)', informing the reader and/or visitor about their status and history.

Interestingly, however, not every item featured on the Freedom of Information response is listed on that webpage. Of the 10 identified artefacts, exactly half are featured. These are the Benin Bronzes from Nigeria, the human remains from Australia, the Ethiopian altar tablets (which are part of the Maqdala collection), the Moai statue from Easter Island, and the "Gweagal" shield from Australia. Two other artefacts which are featured on the webpage, but not in the Freedom of Information response, are the Parthenon marbles from Greece and 1933-45 provenance (i.e. art looted by the Nazis of which the origin remains to be confirmed).

The majority of the identified artefacts listed on the Freedom of Information response were acquired by the museum when its country of origin was a British colony, or just about to become one. Three of these artefacts are from Australia, which is also the only country to make more than one request for return in the last 11 years. The most contested of these three is the "Gweagal" shield. It was on loan to Australia from November 2015 to March 2016, as part of a gallery in the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

This is when Rodney Kelly walked in, and recognized the shield as belonging to his ancestor, the Gweagal warrior Cooman who was the first to confront the British Captain Cook as he landed on the shores of Australia in 1770.



*The "Gweagal" shield. Illustration credit: Meike Eijsberg*

Kelly submitted a request for the return of the shield to the British Museum in October 2016. "What I'm pushing for is not a loan, not just a permanent loan," he told [the Guardian](#) before formally submitting the request. "The shield has got to stay in a museum in Sydney – that's the only place for it – then it's up to the elders of the Gweagal people what goes on with it, how the history relating to it is used for our people and other Australians."

It has [since been disproven by Nicholas Thomas](#), Australian anthropologist, that the shield on display in the British Museum is not the actual Gweagal shield. But that doesn't imply, which Thomas also stated, that the shield should not be repatriated. It's still an incredibly important artefact, both culturally and historically. In fact, as the updated plaque below the shield in the

museum reads, “it is the earliest known Aboriginal shield from Australia and has come to symbolize the first British colonization of Australia and its ongoing legacy, which still affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today.”

Just like the second plaque behind Hoa Hakananai'a, it's unlikely that most visitors will see the shield. Located in the Enlightenment Gallery, it's difficult to view and incredibly easy to miss: the brown shield is set against a red-brown backdrop, behind reflective glass. “There has been no attempt in the museum space to highlight the shield as a masterpiece of treasure,” Procter wrote in her book.

### To display or not to display?

The “Gweagal” shield is not the only Australian artefact that's poorly displayed, according to Procter. But it is one of the few artefacts that *is* displayed. In fact, according to the [British Museum online artefact catalogue](#), only 52 out of 10,055 items originating from Australia are on display. That's 0.52%. Of all the countries listed in the document that the British Museum provided in response to the Freedom of Information request, only Kenya has a lower percentage: 0.18%.

Of the 10 identified items on this list, 4 artefacts are not on display – and 3 of those have never been. These are the Human Remains from Australia, the Ngadji drum from Kenya, and the Ethiopian altar tablets. Despite never being on display, the request for their return was still rejected.

## The British Museum only displays a fraction of its vast collection

The majority of artefacts from these countries are not on display in the British Museum, they reside in a storage room.

Country	Items	Items on display	Percentage displayed ▲
Kenya	7,254	13	0.18%
Australia	10,055	52	0.52%
Easter Island*	835	10	1.2%
Nigeria	16,483	240	1.46%
Turkey	73,676	1,292	1.75%
Ethiopia	3,012	54	1.79%
India	52,388	1,077	2.06%
Italy	147,219	6,983	4.74%

\*Although a 'special territory' of Chile, Easter Island is treated as separate to Chile in the British Museum database.

Table: Meike Eijsberg | Source: British Museum Collection Database (Data collected on 20 April 2022) | Created using Datawrapper and Adobe Illustrator

The reasons for not displaying an artefact vary. The first and most obvious is the available space in the museum: it's limited. Some items are too small or too large to be featured or are simply not deemed important or interesting enough. Moreover, there's the matter of climate regulation: aging artefacts require a constant monitored environment, or else the material of which they are made will decay, or fade [due to light sensitivity](#).

Despite not being able to display everything, [the British Museum is](#) "committed to lending its collection as widely as possible to increase public access," and "much of the permanent collection as possible is available to the public for research, even when objects are not on public display."

But what if an object can never be put on display, let alone viewed by researchers and students? This is the case for Kenya's Ngadji drum, requested for return in late 2015, early 2016. It's unlikely that the average visitor will know about the existence and cultural importance of this drum since the British Museum doesn't seem to acknowledge it. It's logged in their [online artefact catalogue](#), but apart from a five-word description ("friction drum made of wood"), acquisition date, and the identity of the donator, no history is mentioned.

Information about the request for the return of this drum, its origin and its importance, only came to light in August 2019, when [the Washington Post](#) reported on it.

Their journalists travelled to Kenya's Tana River valley, the home of the original owners: the Pokomo people. The Ngadji is immensely important to them, as the god they worship is represented on Earth by this drum. Made from a hollowed-out tree, with cowhide stripped stretched over it, the drum stands taller than any man.

It had intense influence over the community, who saw it as the source of their pride and power. Everyone was allowed to *hear* the drum, as its sound would travel across their entire compound and surrounding villages. But not everyone was allowed to *see* the drum, only the Pokomo Council of elders, the *kidjo*, were. Anyone else from within the community had to go through a strict series of rituals. Anyone from *outside* was forbidden to see the drum. If they did, it would be punishable by death.





*An interpretive sketch of the Ngadji. Illustration credit: Meike Eijsberg*

When Jens J. “Bull” Anderssen, a Norwegian wood trader commissioned by the British East Africa Protectorate to oversee Pokomo land, arrived in 1902, he was expected to abide by the same rules. Instead, today’s remaining kidjo say, he stole the drum at gunpoint. As he dragged it away, the Pokomo people begged him to at least keep the Ngadji out of public sight.

Anderssen seems to have kept that promise – sort of. After changing ownership a handful of times, the drum was donated to the British Museum in 1908 where it has been in storage ever since. The current Pokomo King’s brother, who lives in Liverpool, became the first Pokomo person to see and touch the drum in over a century.

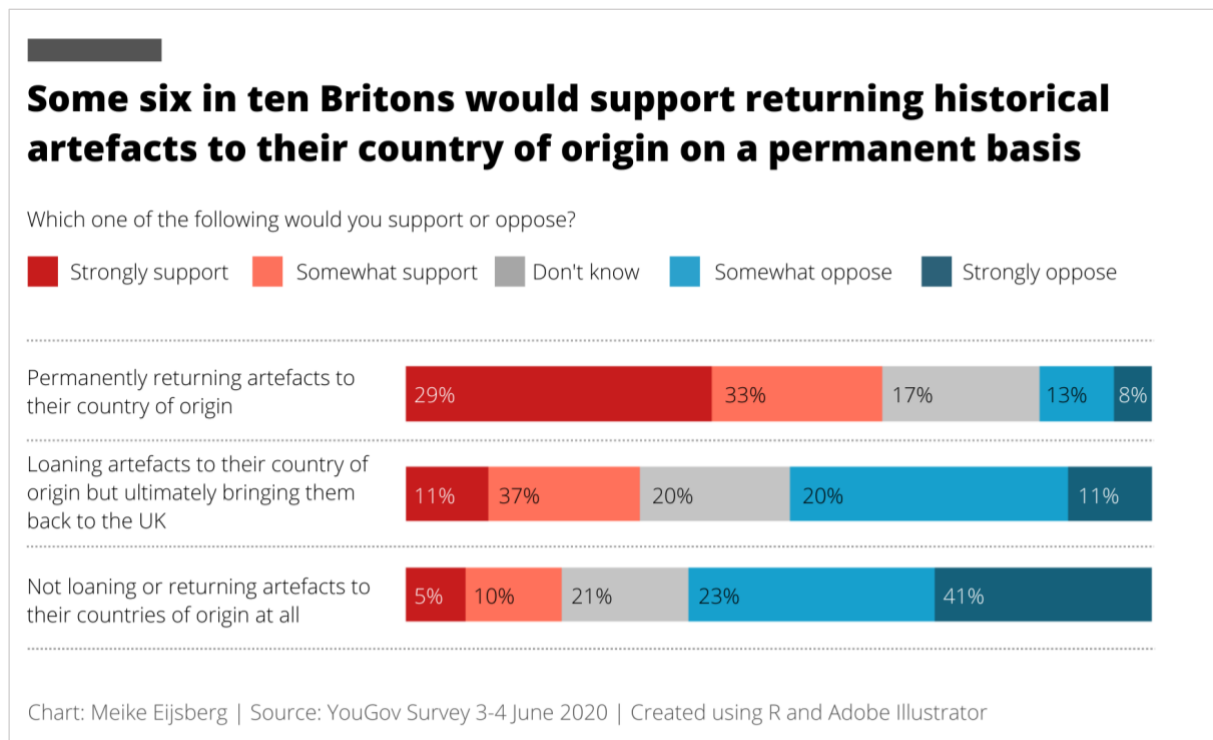
According to the [Washington Post](#), the Pokomo people have accepted the British Museum’s stance – even if they don’t agree with it. But some of the elders, who remember the colonial period vividly, and whose parents and grandparents witnessed the theft of the Ngadji, are less forgiving. They fear that they’ll die before the drum is returned and that the Pokomo culture will pass with them.

The British Museum’s argument, apart from its legal obligations, has always been a utilitarian one: all its 8 million artefacts are safe there and (most) can be viewed by people from all over the world. But the history of this sacred and unique artefact is not highlighted in any way. And, more importantly, the story of a sacred drum that can’t be seen by anyone but its

worshippers, stuck in storage for over a century, begs the question: Why not return such an artefact to those it matters to?

### A call for change

Even though permanent returns aren't possible without a change of the law, more and more people are supporting the idea. According to a [YouGov survey](#) conducted by data journalist Conor Ibbetson, some six in ten Britons (62%) would support returning historical artefacts to their country of origin on a permanent basis. In fact, nearly three in ten (29%) would "strongly" support this.



Conservatives and Labour voters seem to disagree a bit, according to the survey. The latter (61%) thinks that artefacts taken by Britain in the past are more a part of their country of origin's history, while the former (45%) is of the opinion they are a part of both country's histories.

The short stories on Hoa Hakananai'a, the "Gweagal" shield, and the Ngadji drum in this article are only a small snapshot of a long and complicated, often colonial, history. There are at least four other artefacts listed on the Freedom of Information response with similar tales to tell – which the British Museum has failed to do.

"Museums have to change," Procter [wrote](#). "Give us a reason to trust you: show us your records (and not in some labyrinthine catalogue), show us what you have and where it comes from. Let us look at these objects you so desperately don't want to let go of, and show us your case for keeping them."

The plaque behind Hoa Hakananai'a perhaps comes closest to a display like that. But it does not provide a clear indication of what the future will look like. All that is written is that “in 2019, Museum staff travelled to Rapa Nui for discussions, and dialogue with the community continues.” Discussions and dialogue will likely continue for *all* 11 artefacts requested for return in the last 11 years. Perhaps, as more and more museums are returning foreign treasures, the British Museum will finally follow.

But that doesn't mean the museum will lose its entire collection. “Not everyone is asking for their property back: there are plenty of artefacts that weren't stolen or illegally acquired,” Procter [wrote](#). “Those unreturned collections can still tell the story of human history.”