

Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?

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Abstract

This article tests the case set out by the 2002 Declaration, signed by many of the great museums of the world, and elaborated by Neil MacGregor, the Director of the British Museum (BM), that these are universal institutions whose displays enable visitors 'to see the world as one' and hence promote a more tolerant society. I argue that while a universal museum could be invaluable in a world full of conflict and misunderstanding, the credibility of the idea is undermined by its being deployed chiefly as a defense against repatriation claims. MacGregor's accounts of the Benin Bronzes, the Elgin/Parthenon Marbles and the Rosetta Stone are examined as to whether they provide historical, ethical or epistemological support for the idea of the universal museum. I review the current display practices of 'universal museums' and argue that they are as likely to confirm prejudice as to promote tolerance. I conclude with an alternative view of what a universal museum might be – one which is open about the conflicted histories of some objects, which acknowledges historical context as well as aesthetics, explores violent as well as peaceful cultural encounters and reveals the Imperial as well as the Enlightenment history of collections.

Introduction

In an article in the *Guardian* Review Section, published in July 2004, the director of the British Museum (BM), Neil MacGregor, presented the case for this institution being a universal museum. The great quality and diversity of its collection means that the museum can tell the story of all of humanity, showing that 'there are many good ways' to organize society. The BM is uniquely placed to carry out this important, relevant and urgent task. 'Where else' he asks, 'can the world see so clearly that it is one?' Pervading the article is a defence against claims for objects to be returned to their place of origin. Most of the examples he gives of objects carrying messages of universal significance have been subject to such claims. His account of their histories is focused on their role in the BM, whose capacity to demonstrate the unity of the world would, we are left in no doubt, be undermined if they were alienated (MacGregor, 2004c).

His paper develops an argument first unveiled in 2002, when 30 or more of the world's greatest museums, including the 'big five' (the Hermitage in St Petersburg, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, The Berlin State Museum, the British Museum and the Louvre in Paris) declared that they were 'universal' institutions. This was directly prompted by a request for support from the BM which was, MacGregor was reported as saying, experiencing 'grave alarm at the way Greece was applying political pressure over the Marbles and the idea that one Western Country could build a museum to house objects belonging to another' (Bailey, 2003:1). 'So far', said MacGregor, 'the public debate has been conducted very much in terms of the value of restitution, but there has been much less debate about the importance of the context which a great museum offers' (Bailey, 2003:6). Being universal museums gives the signatories the authority to represent all cultures. They do so, not from any singular perspective, but on behalf of the entire world, and in a way, as MacGregor puts it, that is not 'tied to a particular notion of national identity, or comes to be appropriated to a particular political end' (MacGregor, 2004c).

The Declaration was followed up by a conference at which the directors of the 'big five' explained how they are universal museums (Schuster, 2004; de Montebello, 2004; Piotrovski, 2004; Loyette, 2004 and MacGregor, 2004d). Their views were published in *British Museum News* and the Declaration was the cover story of the first issue in 2004 of the *Newsletter of the International Council of Museums* (ICOM).

All this represents an important advance in the discussion of repatriation both within the museum world and in public, especially given MacGregor's great communication skills and, in the words of *The Guardian* report of the conference, his 'overflowing... charisma and intelligence' (Higgins, 2003). Previous BM directors have refused to engage with the question, simply stating the museum's position and assuming that there was nothing to discuss (e.g. Wilson, 2002, 322-3).

The initial reaction to the Declaration was summarized by *The Art Newspaper* under the headline: 'A George Bush approach to international relations' (Bailey, 2003: 7). The *Newspaper* reported that '[t]he international group of directors had wanted to spark off serious discussion. Not surprisingly those critical of the Declaration tended to be first off the mark' (Bailey, 2003: 7). As well as responses from supporters of specific repatriation causes, the paper quoted others: the International Council of Museums, which complained of the Declaration's lack of 'wise and thoughtful judgement'; the UK Museums Association, whose Deputy Director made gave them their headline; the Australian Museums association, which said '[t]here are positive ways of managing the claims related to appropriated cultural material that can build relationships between museums and communities' (Bailey, 2003:7). In the ICOM *Newsletter* devoted to the issue, Geoffrey Lewis, Chair of the organization's Ethics Committee argued that the 'real purpose' of the Declaration was 'to establish a higher degree of immunity from claims' for repatriation (Lewis, 2004: 3).

The presumption that a museum with universally defined objectives may be considered exempt from such demands is specious. The Declaration is a statement of self-interest, made by a group representing some of the world's richest museums; they do not, as they imply, speak for the "international museum community" (Lewis, 2004: 3)

This essay is an attempt to develop the discussion, not so much in terms of restitution, but by exploring the important issues which are locked up in the idea of a universal museum. These issues are, in many ways, more important than the location of a very limited number of the highest profile objects, significant as that is. The gladiatorial appeal for the media of anything to do with repatriation, and the pressure to take sides on specific claims means that there has been little discussion of the wider questions as to what universal museums might be, and what roles they have been playing, or could in the future play, in society. Repatriation might even be seen as something of a distraction from these more important questions, except that it symbolizes many of the problems of inter-cultural communication and of resolving the enduring legacies of painful histories and past injustices which museums, like the rest of the world, are facing. At a time of global terror, wars and ancestral voices prophesying not just war but a catastrophic clash of civilizations, the possibility of there being a coherent universal perspective on cultural difference which would contribute to greater mutual understanding and respect is of the utmost importance. It is however a difficult time for transcultural values. In one of the few works by a professional philosopher on the current state of museums, Lisa Hein says 'the thematic frameworks defining the institution are brittle and ... their spatio-temporal referents are dissolving in a world that affirms the global while denying the universal' (Hein, 2000: xi). The validity of universal values is a vital issue in many disciplines, from sociology to aesthetics, human rights to philosophy. The underlying challenge is to identify universals which are not simply projections of western cultural values (Brannigan, 2000; Coote *et al.*, 1996; Kushner, 1999; Nussbaum, 1999; Paden, 2001). If museums were capable of helping to devise and communicate a universal perspective on cultural values which achieves credibility and currency outside western cultural elites, they would indeed make an invaluable contribution to global society.

The unsurpassed quality and range, both temporal and geographical, of the collections of the Declaration signatories provide *prima facie* evidence that they have, at the very least,

the resources from which such a perspective could be built. This article is an attempt to explore this potential and the difficulties which derive from a putative universal role being deployed by museums primarily as a defence against repatriation. The development of a universal perspective will be endangered if it comes to be seen as, in itself, evidence of cultural insensitivity or an instrument of injustice. I will explore what can be learned about the nature of the universal museum from the statements of the various signatories of the Declaration, concentrating on those of the director of the British Museum. Because the latter has focused so much on the issue of repatriation, I will review the summary accounts which MacGregor gives of some of the claims faced by the BM, to see what they reveal about the museums' perception of a universal history and how this relates to its new 'worldwide civic role'. I will touch on some of the epistemological and ethical issues which arise out of the idea of a universal museum and the implications of this ambitious role for the display practices of the signatories to the Declaration.

A very British Museum

MacGregor's account of the BM's universality at the time of the Declaration differed from those of his fellow directors in providing a justification based not on its current capacities, but on the specific qualities of British society during and since the eighteenth century, a case which he amplified in *The Guardian* article. The museum derived its universality from the characteristics of the newly emerging British culture at the time of its foundation in 1753. Strongly influenced by the violence and disorder of the Civil War and the very recent Jacobite uprising (1745), these included: governance based on disinterested trusteeship at arms length from monarchy and politicians, in contrast to that of the Louvre; a commitment to the Protestant ideal of social and intellectual liberty and a rejection of Catholic authoritarianism, such as was found in France; a practical rationality and a rejection of excessive abstraction, religious enthusiasm and intellectual extremism, such as was found in France; and a sense of cultural identity which was inclusive and tolerant. The BM's new 'worldwide civic purpose' is rooted in its original objectives: to be open to 'all citizens... free of charge and as of right'; to address 'questions of contemporary politics and international relations'; and to 'generate tolerance and understanding' (MacGregor, 2004c). MacGregor sets the foundation of the museum alongside another landmark of 1753, the passage of a law enabling Jews to become naturalized citizens, and suggests that the museum was in part a reaction to the kind of prejudice which led the mob to riot, causing the naturalization legislation to be repealed (MacGregor, 2004c).

The universal museum and repatriation

The Elgin/Parthenon Marbles

MacGregor argues that the Greeks' claim that the Parthenon Marbles are a key symbol of the origins of European democracy to which they have a special claim is flawed. Why? In his view it is because ancient Athens owned slaves, was a 'maritime imperial power' and built the Parthenon with tribute exacted from fellow Greeks. This kind of moralistic presentism is a tough standard: it means that the origins of elements of modern society which we regard as good (e.g. democracy, museums, the law) have to be perfect in our terms from the very beginning if elements of that society are to merit our approval, or to be drawn upon as an inspiration in facing present difficulties. A more relevant comparison might have been between ancient Greek democracy and British society in 1753, a time when most literate people in Britain would have taken it for granted that ancient Greek culture was superior in almost every way to that of Britain. In the decade of the BM's foundation, Britain took part in the Seven Years War (often described as the first world war), competing with France and Spain for global maritime domination. It saw Clive conquering parts of India, while the first genuinely global commodity market was operating between Britain, Africa and the Americas: each year between forty and fifty thousand Africans were enslaved, with Britain by far the largest trader. On average one in six of those shipped from Africa died during the voyage (Eltis and Richardson, 1997). At the same time taxes were being exacted from England's fellow Britons

who were often unwilling partners in the Imperial endeavour – not just Highland Scots and Catholic Irish, but Americans, whose increasing resentment led them to break away from the mother country within twenty years. Perhaps it is the sense that current good things need to have pristine origins that leads MacGregor to give the impression that the BM was accessible in modern terms from the beginning. It was indeed 'open to all citizens' - as open as, for example, voting for parliament. In other words it was limited to those of high status, the well educated and the well off. Prospective visitors had to write and request a ticket.

If the Greek case for possessing the marbles is undermined by the flaws in ancient imperial Athens's democracy, is the British Museum's case undermined by the limitations of imperial eighteenth-century England's liberty? If the implicit basis for being able to sustain a universal museum is a tradition of democracy dating back to the eighteenth century, how does the Hermitage fit in? (Interestingly the director of the Hermitage is frank and unembarrassed about that collection being Imperial in character (Loyette, 2004)). And what of universal museums in America, where slave owning continued up to the Civil War, and a form of apartheid up to the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s and '70s?

MacGregor also argues that the modern Greek claim lacks credibility because it is motivated by the political need to construct an identity after the country's (recent) emergence from military dictatorship. There seems to be an assumption here that cultural identity can be, indeed should be, largely apolitical, and that good cultural institutions, like the British Museum, are beyond politics. While its Trust status (we are assured) gives it some distance from party and parliamentary politics, it is hard to see how the BM is not political. MacGregor implies that it expresses through its displays, in its workings and in its very existence, an ideal of how society should be. Why is modern Greek democracy 'a narrow political end' and constructing British identity in the past 250 years as egalitarian, tolerant and multicultural not? What is wrong with modern Greeks that means that they could not run a universal museum? According to Kenneth Clark, writing in *Civilisation* (1969) the ideal of ancient Greek culture 'was without doubt the most extraordinary creation in the whole of history' (Clark, 1969:3). Why would contemporary Greeks drawing on this legacy to strengthen their democracy narrow the meanings of the marbles for others and make them 'exclusive'? The identification of what we view as 'bad politics' with politics as a bad thing, and of 'good politics' with the apolitical, natural, status quo is precisely how ideology works. In just this way the British Empire saw itself as a force for good, taking on the task of civilizing the world as a disinterested duty, a burden in fact, given the amount of violent ingratitude it met in response.

The Benin Bronzes

MacGregor's account of the Benin bronzes is also innocent of ideology, and again it is hard to see how it supports the case for their retention, at least without the trump card of universality. He acknowledges the punitive expedition against Benin City in 1897, carried out after members of a British trade delegation were murdered. The meaning of the bronzes for the people of Benin and their ruler, the Oba, was, he says, to impress visitors with their 'technological virtuosity and sheer wealth'. They were looted as a result of civil disorder, which he compares with Baghdad, and, he tells us, once in the BM they played a part in increasing the appreciation of African artistry in the West: '[o]ut of the terrible circumstances of the 1897 dispersal, a new, more securely grounded view of Africa and of African culture could be formed' (MacGregor, 2004c). In a subsequent radio interview he summarized his views:

The circumstances of the taking of the Benin Bronzes were violent, but if we look at what happened when they arrived, it seems to be that from then on it was totally beneficial' (BBC 29/07/04).

The bronzes were not dispersed accidentally during an unfortunate outbreak of civil disorder caused by person or persons unknown. The disorder was created by the punitive expedition, in particular by its use of an exciting new WMD, the Maxim machine gun, and the expedition systematically confiscated the metal and ivory objects as part of the punitive action. Some are charred as a result of the fires caused by the attack. If Baghdad were the comparator, it would be like the Americans following up their 'shock and awe' invasion by looting the National

Museum of Iraq themselves and selling the artifacts to museums in London and New York.

While elsewhere in his article MacGregor, bizarrely, claims that museums in Britain enable a religious response to objects, more so than their excessively rationalistic French equivalents, he nonetheless downplays the religious meaning of the bronzes. At least as important as their technological and status symbolism for Benin was their religious and ritual significance in relation to the genealogy of the sacred kingship of the Oba, which continues intact to this day. Perhaps it is more difficult to assert the superiority of a universal cultural value over the living religious meanings of sacred objects.

The bronzes did contribute to the appreciation of African art in the West, but the 'beneficial' impact did not take place 'from then on' but much later. Not all scholars at the time thought the bronzes were great technical achievements – some saw them as 'hideous' 'idols' and 'fetishes' which provided evidence of the inferior nature of African people, cultures and religions. Even those scholars who were impressed shared the widespread view that all the bronzes and ivories must be old, as the current Benin people were too 'degenerate' to have created them, to the extent that descriptions and photographs of Benin people working metal were suppressed in reports of the expedition (Coombs, 1994). In the entry on Benin in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, there is no reference to the bronzes. They do however rate a mention in the article on the 'Negro':

Given suitable training, the Negro is capable of becoming a craftsman of considerable skill, particularly in metal work, carpentry and carving. The bronze castings by the *cire perdue* process, and the cups and horns of ivory elaborately carved which were produced by the natives of Guinea after their intercourse with the Portuguese of the 16th century, bear ample witness to this. But the rapid decline and practical evanescence of both industries, when that intercourse was interrupted, shows that the native craftsman was raised for the moment above his normal level by direct foreign inspiration...

For many years after they were first shown in the British Museum, the Benin Bronzes and Ivories, like the rest of the displays, were interpreted within a deterministic, evolutionary, social Darwinism and seen as clear evidence of the superiority of European culture and of the white race, in particular the British, over all others.

Even when appreciation of African art did emerge, it was still informed by racist assumptions of the times. Eric Newton, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford University, in *The Arts of Man* (1960) wrote a vivid and enthusiastic account of 'ritual masks from Africa'. 'No race' he said, 'has possessed a more extraordinary power to invent such images than those of the Gold and Ivory Coasts of Africa or of the Belgian Congo (Newton, 1960: 280-1). He concluded that,

African sculpture is not, in any conscious sense of the word, "art." It owes its shape not to the aesthetic sensitivity of the artists, as does a Greek statue, but to a purpose to be fulfilled, as does a scythe or a lathe, or an airplane. This is true to such an extent that the African, who uses such images for magical purposes and finds that they do not "work" as spirit scarers or rain-producers or whatever their purpose may be, will destroy them as readily as a modern engineer will scrap an ineffective machine, with no suspicion that in doing so he may be destroying a work of art.

He acknowledged that the Benin Bronzes were exceptional in showing a 'personality, not a type', and he contrasted them with a highly abstract animal mask. But, he concluded, they had something in common: 'Evidently a race of sculptors who could design human or animal symbols with equal confidence can hardly have been conscious that between the two there is a difference in kind' (Newton, 1960: 283-5).

At the end of the same decade Kenneth Clark contrasted an African mask with a pure white marble Greek head of the Apollo Belvedere. He speculated that most people might regard the African mask as a greater work of art and find it more moving than the Apollo: '[w]hatever its merits as a work of art, I don't think there is any doubt that the Apollo embodies a higher state of civilisation than the mask' (Clark, 1969:2). Clark makes no mention of the

fact that the Apollo would originally have been painted in bright colours – colours which would have conflicted with the fantasy of the pure white classical ideal by seeming vulgar or garish (perhaps a touch African or even Catholic). The caption for the mask discussed by Clark says nothing about the culture from which it derives. The only information given is that art critic Roger Fry once owned it. The aesthetic appreciation of African sculpture was led not by museum anthropologists, but museum displays did enable artists like Picasso, Vlaminck, Miro, and Matisse and art critics like Fry to see examples and be inspired by them (Willett, 1997:35). The lateness of the detailed appreciation of the artistic quality of the Benin bronzes within the BM is reflected in the fact that as many as seventeen plaques which had been cast as pairs and designed to be seen together, were deemed by the curator to be duplicates and were sold in the 1970s (BBC News, 27 March 2002).

While appreciation of a culture's achievement by outsiders is no doubt, *A Good Thing*, in a situation of unequal power, it can easily shade into an implication that the subjects of appreciation should be grateful that they are being appreciated. Their gratitude should be all the greater if it is not just anyone who is appreciating their work – if they are being judged meritorious by *the* people who decide the standards of what is to be appreciated, by Western scholars, and most flatteringly of all, by famous artists. The assumptions underlying the consequentialist argument (that by being in the BM, the Bronzes have helped the world to a better appreciation of African culture, no longer seeing it as barbaric and inferior) are driven by circular reasoning. This reasoning is roughly the equivalent of saying to the people of Benin, 'You don't appreciate how important your bronzes have been in enabling us to reduce our racist perception of you as inferior. These objects are such great artistic achievements that they belong to the whole world – your interest in them is too narrow. The clinching evidence of the unfortunate narrowness of your view of their significance is your request for their return.'

There is an echo of this metropolitan assumption that marginalized or conquered peoples depend on the centre for their value to be affirmed at the entrance to the BM's new Africa Gallery. The introductory panel is not, as might be expected in a traditional museum, a map of Africa or an overview of the exhibition, or in a more visitor-focused museum, a map with photographs of African people and their objects. Instead there is a dedication to Lord Sainsbury, not only for his role as benefactor to the Museum but as a collector of African art, and to Henry Moore, who Picasso-like, led the appreciation of African sculpture as art in Britain.

The Rosetta Stone

MacGregor presents the Rosetta Stone as the 'supreme example' of the 'transformational new understanding' which the new object-based scholarship could bring. 'Once it was possible to read history from the perspective of ancient Egypt, it became clear that the account presented in the Hebrew Old Testament had to be robustly questioned. The literal truth, the absolute authority of scriptural tradition could not easily resist the kinds of advances in historical knowledge unlocked by the Rosetta Stone'. He then moves seamlessly on to the impact of another object having being deciphered in the BM. 'And it was not just Egypt. In 1872, George Smith, an assistant in the museum, deciphered a neo-Assyrian seventh-century BC tablet from Nineveh' (MacGregor, 2004c). It would seem reasonable to conclude from this sequence that possessing the expertise to translate esoteric texts is part of the basis for the BM's universal authority and its right to possess these iconic objects. But the Rosetta Stone was translated by a French scholar, Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832). This was a source of some embarrassment at the time, as the object had been exacted from the French after their defeat by the British at the Battle of the Nile. In the 1816-24 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Thomas Young, Champollion's British rival, complained of the lack of progress in translating the scripts, as this meant that its status as loot superceded its role in the world of knowledge. It, had, he said, ceased to represent British scholarly achievements and had become instead 'useless though a glorious trophy of British valour'.

What kind of history can you expect in a universal museum?

There may be good arguments for the BM to keep these objects, but they do not seem to arise readily from their specific histories or from the history of British culture. All history is selective

in what it represents of the past and, no matter on which side of the postmodern fence one stands, the ideal is to make as rational a sample as possible on the basis of the significance of the data in helping answer questions about the past (Fischer, 1970; Jordan, 1997). This enables links to be made with contemporary issues without engaging in presentism, and what has been called the Whig interpretation of history. This optimistic view sees the past in terms of its ends and the present as the inevitable result of successive victories of progress over reaction. It leads to data being selected in order to justify rather than to explain the present and to making moral judgments about past societies. At an extreme it leads to de Montebello's view that 'If people stopped looking retrospectively at centuries ago, and moved forward, then everyone would be "on the same page"' (Bailey, 2003). Lord Gowrie's dictum that 'It's loot, but it's our loot' at least had the merit of not requiring history to be distorted, people's ancestors to be found morally deficient, or the whole of history to be dismissed as something which is an excuse for some people not to keep up. Without a more coherent way of relating the present to the past, it is hard to see how these museums can function as universal institutions.

Seeing the world as one: ethics and the universal museum

If the historical case put forward for retaining the objects is unstable, what of the values which support it? The view that the marbles or the bronzes will do more good in London than in their place of origin is a utilitarian ethical judgment, the end justifying the means. And it is certainly true that many more people, and more different types of people, would see them in London (or Berlin or New York) than in Athens or Benin City (or Lagos), though the claim by the director of the Metropolitan Museum that 'in these large museums the audiences are... the whole world' suggests a certain remoteness from (or indifference to?) the economic realities of life for the majority of humanity (de Montebello, 2004:19). What must be set against the good done to all these people is not just the loss of the potential benefit restitution would bring to the people whose cultures produced the objects, but also the potential harm of them not being returned. Non-return is not a neutral act. Difficult as it is to make this assessment – especially without a formal process which this kind of complex judgment usually requires – what is being compared is two possible goods. The balance may still be tipped in favour of the great museums retaining (some of? all of?) the objects, but this does not necessarily negate the validity of the claim for return. If directors of universal museums are going to invoke the authority of Edward Said and take up his injunction to explore 'the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other and live together', they need to find a language which respects the sensibilities and values of cultures whose equivalent of the crown jewels or the Magna Carta have been 'borrowed' (MacGregor, 2004c; Warren, 1991).

Given that the scholars in universal museums know a great deal about their collections' originating cultures, often having been funded to carry out fieldwork amongst them, it would seem reasonable that they experience some level of empathy with the people making requests for return. It is also likely that they would be resentful, feeling perhaps that the value of their work and their integrity are being questioned, that they are being blamed for historical events for which they cannot be held responsible and that they are being asked to give up objects to which they feel loyalty and attachment. In such circumstances staff would be torn, and experience the tensions inherent in a difficult dilemma, a genuine quandary. Even if the appearance of detachment is largely a matter of the clinical style of display favoured by the Declaration signatories, the absence in public communications of any empathy with, and the denial of any legitimacy at all, to repatriation claims undermines the credibility of their case that they are capable of a universal view. Equally, if the basis of ownership-on-behalf-of-humanity argument is that these museums communicate that 'there are many good ways of organizing the world' more effectively than do the claimants' institutions, the assertion of universality is unlikely to convince if it is based on an assumption that, for example, Greek and French ways of organizing the world are inferior. There are many good ways of organizing the world, but some are more organized than others?

The universal museum in practice

If the basis of the case for universal museums to retain contested objects is the greater good they will do, then what really matters is the degree to which they do the particular kind of good on which they base their claim. There is no evidence that the universal museums encourage visitors to 'see the world as one', engage with 'questions of contemporary politics and international relations' or 'generate tolerance and understanding' (MacGregor, 2004c). Even as statements of an unrealized ideal, this has not been the avowed purpose of universal museums, including the BM, in any significant way prior to the Declaration.

Far from emphasizing the universal, museums in general, and the Declaration signatories in particular, tend to overemphasize the distinctiveness and separateness of cultures. They focus on a narrow definition of authenticity which constantly tends towards an essentialist view of cultures and of the relationship between objects and cultures (Errington, 1998). Far from taking a Saidian view, they minimize the impact of interactions between peoples and of change over time (or at least over the time up to peoples being discovered, conquered or supplanted by the West). Each of the museums claiming universal status has had galleries devoted to diverse world cultures within the same building for decades or centuries. They have been universal, or at least global, in a geographical sense since their beginnings, but it could not be shown that they have been promoting the kind of liberal world view now being expounded. During most of that time the objects were co-opted into communicating messages of imperial, white, male and national superiority. They did 'see the world as one', but as one which was appropriately ruled by the West and where the Western aesthetic sense was accepted as a universally valid perspective (Coote et al., 1996). The most important consequence of this has been that issues of power relations and conflict between peoples were simply ignored. Thus while well-disposed liberals might read a 'world as one' message into their displays, it is not inherent in them. 'We need not dwell' MacGregor tells us, 'on the mythical Britain, racially pure, of BNP fantasy'. There is nothing in the displays which challenges the views of the British National Party, though like the anti-Semitic (and anti-Catholic) mob of the eighteenth century, they don't seem likely to be frequent visitors to the BM. At least as probable as museum goes using displays to challenge their preconceptions, says Higgins in her review of the 2003 conference, is that they will 'use museums to complacently confirm their sense of superiority over 'primitives' from the past or from distant lands – a view that tends to be bolstered rather than otherwise by traditional forms of curatorship' (Higgins, 2003).

While displays in universal museums may have been updated, drawing on the best recent scholarship, none differs in its fundamental epistemology and mode of communication from those mounted 100 years ago. While they may have left evolutionism behind they still use categories derived from Victorian taxonomies of nature, art and materials, rather than from the cultures which produced the objects. They still aspire to be detached, academic, decontextualized and hierarchical, to be outside time, history and politics, and to privilege Western aesthetic over other non-rational meanings, be they cultural, emotional or spiritual. Communicating the idea that 'there are many good ways of organizing the world' and inspiring visitors to conclude from this that respect for world cultures is a good thing, would require a far more radical change in display philosophy than any of these museums is even contemplating. The BM's 'Living and Dying' and 'Enlightenment' displays were treated as innovative by London art critics – but that's because they have no knowledge of what is happening outside metropolitan art museums (Higgins, 2003: Campbell, 2003).

MacGregor's proposed active engagement with civil society is a radical change from the museum's previously open-ended, art-for-arts-sake and pure-knowledge-for-its-own-sake philosophy. This was clearly articulated by David Wilson, director of the BM from 1977 to 1992:

The public must have an experience, aesthetic, cultural, emotional or one of half a hundred exclamatory sensations, ranging from the spiritual to the curious, when they visit the museum. ... Good taste and restraint are vital. It is the objects which are important: they must speak for themselves (Wilson, 1985:57-8).

When the BM was redisplaying the Parthenon Marbles in the 1930s, the first design proposed was a colourful setting which might have evoked something of their original impact. Wilson expressed relief that the more 'clinical' current design was chosen (Wilson, 2002, caption to plates 25 and 26). It may be true, as MacGregor states, that the Marbles embody far more than Greek culture and reveal a wide range of influences from the east, but neither this, nor the amazing story of their impact on western art is communicated by the displays. The prior knowledge assumed to be possessed by the visitor to make these links is so specialist as to be unlikely even in people who are (in Western terms) well educated – and this effect is multiplied throughout the museum. Despite marginal changes, displays in universal museums are still based on Wilson's view that 'The museum's client is generally intelligent and able to read or use libraries to look up background. ...The national museum director generally – unless using his museum for political purposes – is usually catering for the intelligent child or the intelligent adult' (Wilson, 1985:57-8). Intelligence, in this view, is not a complex phenomenon with a wide spectrum of genetic and nurtured abilities, but a clear quality which can be used to test museum visitors to ensure they meet minimum standards. The elision of intelligence and education and of both with the cultural practices of museum visiting, create a virtuous circle which proves the museum is always doing the right thing. The museum displays are aimed at people who are intelligent, therefore those who feel comfortable with them are intelligent: people who are not catered for (e.g. by not providing interpretation or human interest contexts) and who as a result feel uncomfortable and alienated by the displays are, by definition, not intelligent. By contrast the director of the Louvre sees this approach to displays as an acute problem:

How can we reconcile the new social and educational role of the museum with our heritage sometimes heavy with styles of presentation that is based on categories largely inherited from the 19th century and intended only for the connoisseur and the art historian? We talk of comparisons, corresponding echoes, parallels, cross-references, and yet we display our collections in departments, by techniques, by schools. At a time when much thought is given to *mondialisation*, we are still constrained by the cultural boundaries of the past. What is at stake is certainly the understanding by the public of what it sees' (Loyette, 2004:21).

In the excessively abstract way we have now come to expect from the French, there is little sense that the Louvre is doing anything about this, other than at the very basic level of providing better signage to enable visitors to find their way around the labyrinthine museum, but the fundamental challenge to universal museums is very clearly set out. If Loyette and Higgins are right, then neither the British Museum, nor any of the other universal institutions, has an effective method for doing the kind of good on which it bases its claim to universality.

Unless the museums which signed the Declaration make a fundamental shift in their basic mode of engaging with visitors, they will remain not universal, but narrowly metropolitan. Despite new mission statements tailored to fit the political language of our time, they continue to insist on being the centre, not merely in a geographical or demographic sense which could be transcended, but as the point from which all others are viewed and judged. The clearest evidence for this is the almost complete absence of any but the curatorial voice from their displays - there is no technical or aesthetic reason why historical and/or contemporary voices from the cultures which produced the objects couldn't be included. The sense of being the invisible centre is reinforced by the exemption of one culture in each museum from scrutiny – that of the metropolitan country itself. The absence of post-medieval Britain from the BM may be explained in terms of the other national institutions such as the Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum, but this is not quite the point. There is no museum of British history in Britain, and its absence is most significant in the British Museum. Many, perhaps most of the objects in the BM are intimately bound up with the history of the British people overseas, in the many roles they played as representatives of the Empire on which the sun never set: – soldiers, sailors, missionaries, merchants, diplomats, explorers, settlers, planters, engineers, administrators, scientists. Many of these acquired objects in ways regarded as legitimate

at the time by both parties in the transaction. In other cases however the inequality of power between the British collector and the community or individual was a vital factor in the object's acquisition. In an institution aspiring to a universal perspective which addresses 'questions of contemporary politics and international relations' and aims to 'generate tolerance and understanding', the omission of this aspect of world history is a fatal flaw. The invisible, all-seeing eye of the panopticon may have a 360-degree global view, but it cannot be universal because it does not partake of being both subject and object, because it does not acknowledge its own role in making history, and its intrinsic relationship with the deployment of imperial power.

Conclusion

One of the most pressing problems in the world is the need to develop and promote universal normative values which protect individuals and communities from oppression, enabling them to realize as much of their potential as possible, while at the same time respecting particular cultural traditions. Despite the fact that for most of their existence the signatories to the universal museums Declaration have fed the rationale for colonial domination, their great collections do present unrivalled opportunities to explore the relationship of the universal and the particular. If they were to embrace rather than ignore the fact that the superiority of white, male, Western, academic perspectives is being challenged, particularly in their authority to speak about and on behalf of 'the other', they might be able to contribute to this exploration. Displays could begin to redress the essentialist tendencies of museums and recognize the importance of interactions between cultures as well as their distinctiveness. This would include interactions involving armed conflict and conquest as well as trade since – well, choose a date. The building of the Great Wall of China? 1492? The First Crusade? The conversion of Saint Paul? The birth of Abraham? They could experiment to find techniques of combining high aesthetic standards with communicating the historical and/or contemporary meanings of objects. They could represent in the galleries historical and contemporary voices from the cultures being interpreted and the context of the production and use of the objects. They could draw on the powerful analytical concepts and inspirational values of the Enlightenment to promote mutual understanding and respect amongst peoples, rather than use them as a teleological rationale for the inequalities of the *status quo*. And perhaps above all they could put the collections in their Imperial as well as their Enlightenment contexts.

At a time when the need for places where the relationship between the universal and the particular needs to be worked out, the definition of universal MacGregor uses seems to mean simply having diverse material in one place (in separate rooms) and thus providing the opportunity for 'cultures to be compared' (MacGregor, 2004a: 7). Based on his *Guardian* article one might think that the BM was going to assess the cultures of the world since the dawn of time in terms of their capacity for universal perspective, political liberty, individual freedom, female equality, and avoidance of narrow nationalism, excessive rationalism and religious enthusiasm - in fact in terms of their human rights record vis-à-vis Great Britain's, as understood in twenty-first century terms. This would certainly make for interesting and relevant, if ahistorical, displays, but it seems that only those cultures claiming objects back will be judged in this way (and, for some reason, the French). And this comparison is not to happen in displays, but only in lectures and essays. Meanwhile the displays continue to communicate their old message – the superiority and untainted goodness of the collecting, displaying, appreciating, judging civilization.

MacGregor makes an ethical argument based on the utilitarian value of the greatest good, achieved in this case by comparing cultures, but there is no epistemological foundation put forward or implied to support this. What are the criteria of comparison? What is the basis for the kind of history which faults modern Greeks for their slave-owning past, but absolves Britons? How are the benefits of objects being retained in large western metropolises to be measured against the loss to their originating cultures? How are historic collections and the power relations they embody to be related to contemporary international issues? What principles can be derived from cross-cultural comparisons which could help resolve current cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings (of which one of the relatively minor, non-fatal,

issues is repatriation)? What is the basis for claiming that universal museums promote tolerance when their display philosophy, underdetermined and shaped by a modernist Euroamerican aesthetic which still sees the objects as 'speaking for themselves' and are as open to a BNP as to a liberal interpretation (Messenger, 1991; Thompson, 2003)? What universal values can be represented by a museum when the whole point of its existence is 'that high intellectual one of showing that truths are always relative'? (MacGregor, 2004 c).

A universal museum would, by definition, create displays which addressed the realities of power relations, past and present. Without facing up to human destructiveness in displays, 'seeing the world as one' achieves little more than a Coke or Benetton advertisement, portraying humanity (or at least those of its members who were good at art) as one big happy family. The world is haunted by violence and terror because there are many bad as well as good ways of organizing society. Nor is there any clear link between those cultures which were good for people and those which were good at art. But none of the universal museums acknowledges that, in the words of Walter Benjamin, the great artworks in museums

owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to the other' (Benjamin, 1970:258).

It is difficult to imagine universal museums taking on a more valuable role in society than that of exploring the relationship between universal norms and the particular (or mixed) cultural traditions within which people live. Definitions of these norms are often rejected as the imposition of western values on cultures to which they are alien and as norms which the west respects selectively, as suits its interests – hence the importance of the credibility of a universal perspective. A great deal of the violence and intimidation inflicted in the world arises from the perpetrators' fear of loss of certainty in identity, and a consequent desire to return to imagined purer states, to destroy apparent threats. Identity is neither as fluid as postmodern theorists maintain, nor as fixed as fundamentalists assert, meaning that choices, by individuals and societies, are both more difficult and more important than in either school of thought. A more focused meaning of the displays of a universal museum than 'seeing the world as one' might be something like 'seeing how cultures change, evolve, conflict and intermingle, while at the same time retaining deep continuities, and how choices made to change or to remain the same radically affect the lives of individuals for good or ill'. The material reality of museum objects could play a unique role in exploring, in terms of possible universal values, the nature of individual and group identities in relation to their inherited cultures, their responses to change and to the cultures they encounter. Truly universal institutions would grapple with the possibility that, in the words of Michael Ignatieff 'the central importance of human rights in the history of human progress' is that it 'has abolished the hierarchy of civilizations and cultures' (Ignatieff, 2003:94). Only when museums embrace this as their core ethic and epistemology will they realize their potential to help create a more humane world and achieve some sort of universality. We do need the great museums to take on the (deeply political) task of enabling the world to see itself as one – but one in which not all ways of organizing the world are good, and in which some genuine cultural traditions are best abandoned because they are oppressive. They would accept and take responsibility for the facts that there are elements of barbarism in their histories, that there is an unavoidable political dimension to all museum communication, that they live with the tensions of being torn between empathy and possession - and they would recognize that the safe space of the museum is ideally suited to explore these issues. As a result their displays would have more depth, more light and shade, and a more creative interplay of rational and non-rational meanings than those which avoid painful historical issues on the grounds of taste or of aesthetic and academic detachment. Not only would such displays be more stimulating for the public, they would enable far more, and more explicit, connections to be made between objects, current issues and historical legacies which matter to people - without abandoning

the ideal of rigour and fairness in relation to the evidence. They might cease to be merely global and thus attain universality by achieving something local which is of worldwide importance - contributing to the urgent task of creating post-Imperial identities for Britain, America, Russia and France, their peoples and their great museums. The BM is already doing important work which could be seen as steps in this direction - for example in providing leadership in relation to Iraq and in celebrating the heritage of the Sudan. In order to further explore the potential of the universal museum concept in similar fruitful ways it is essential not to allow the issue of repatriation to engulf it.

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