



By: *Harvey Morris*

# Are museums a thing of the past?



There is a whiff of Sherlock Holmes about the Curious Case of the British Museum, a catalogue of thefts from the venerable institution that overshadows the elegant Victorian terraces of London's Bloomsbury.

The museum admitted earlier this year that some 2,000 artefacts, gold jewels and gems among them, had disappeared as part of a shadowy enterprise going back decades.

George Osborne, chair of the trustees, added to the whodunnit flavour of the scandal when he told a parliamentary committee last week: "We were the victims of an inside job."

Along with his expressions of apology and lessons learned, the former UK Chancellor said the events nevertheless presented an opportunity to ring the changes by making the culture of the museum more open and accessible.

Some critics say that ringing the changes is long overdue. The thefts were "another sad incident in the slow-motion car crash of the Victorian model of curation," according to Dan Hicks, the curator of world archaeology at Oxford University's Pitt Rivers Museum.

The British Museum affair has drawn attention to a wider debate about the role and responsibilities of museums that extends far beyond the UK.

In an era of digitisation, AI and the metaverse, what are museums actually for?

The focus of current soul-searching within the museum sector is whether institutions founded between the 18th to 20th centuries continue to serve a purpose in the 21st.

**In an era of digitisation, AI and the metaverse, what are museums actually for?**

The American Alliance of Museums is among the bodies seeking to provide some answers at a Future of Museums Summit that opens next month with the task, among other lofty aims,

of examining how museums might help build bridges and foster tolerance to strengthen democracy.

Some of the topics for debate will be familiar to museum boards around the world: the challenge of incorporating new technology, pressures on staffing and funding, and the vexed question of repatriating the foreign artefacts their institutions hold.

The British Museum case revived demands from as far afield as China, Nigeria and Greece for the return of national treasures they regard as stolen in a previous crime wave, plundered by imperialist adventurers.

"The vast majority of the British Museum's huge collection of up to eight million items came from countries other than the UK," according to China's Global Times. "And a significant portion of it was acquired through improper channels, even dirty and sinful means."

**At its best, an encyclopedic museum is a way for the world to represent itself to itself**

Like counterparts in Europe the US, the British Museum was founded as an encyclopedic museum, an institution that would gather artefacts from around the world to offer visitors and scholars a global perspective on culture and history.

At its best, according to the classicist Mary Beard, a British Museum trustee, an encyclopedic museum is a way for the world to represent itself to itself.

At its worst, according to critics of the concept, such institutions principally reflect the mythical self-image of former imperial powers.

The argument in favour of repatriation is that national treasures belong in national museums: the Parthenon marbles should be in Greece, the Benin bronzes in Nigeria, the Wei dynasty scrolls in China.

The counter-argument is that national museums may simply replace imperial myths with national ones, reinforcing ideas of national exceptionalism rather than highlighting the interlocking cultural heritage of a shared global reality.

One solution would be for ownership of artefacts to revert to the countries from which they originated, while long-term loans or leases would allow them to be still exhibited abroad.

To be fair to today's hard-pressed curators, the museum sector has not stood still since what some might regard as its Victorian heyday.

**The modern museum visitor is invited to view the past through the eyes of the mass of humanity rather than just those of its emperors and empresses, kings and queens**

From the 1960s onwards, dusty and badly labelled display cases gave way to interactive and explanatory exhibitions to tell more graphic, nuanced and well-rounded stories of the past.

There has been a new focus on revealing the lost histories of ordinary people and formerly neglected minorities. The British Museum itself will soon be educating visitors about the life of the humble legionnaire in the Roman army and celebrating the lives of previous generations of black Britons.

The modern museum visitor is invited to view the past through the eyes of the mass of humanity rather than just those of its emperors and empresses, kings and queens.

But can't we all do that at the tap of a key on the internet these days? Why maintain expensive institutions that not everyone will get to visit anyway?

Certainly, new technology has much to offer the sector. It will perhaps help the British

Museum and others to finally catalogue the mountains of artefacts that they apparently do not even know they have.

If museums embrace the concept of the metaverse, they could practically dissolve their physical presence and decamp to the virtual world.

Some futurists would argue that, in such a brave new world, little in terms of practical educational or scholarly value would be lost.

What would be lost, however, would be the mystical and intangible connections that humans have with objects from the past. The physical proximity of a stone age axe head, a faded runic inscription or an ancient grave offering inspires a greater affinity with our ancestors than a multitude of virtual alternatives.

Perhaps there is an essential truth in the British Museum's claim that it is "driven by an insatiable curiosity for the world, a deep belief in objects as reliable witnesses and documents of human history."