

JOS VAN BEURDEN

INCONVENIENT

COLONIAL COLLECTIONS AND RESTITUTION IN THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM

HERITAGE



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To all the men and women who created them



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 11 Preface
Two countries in one book – In search of a framework – About this research
- 17 **PART I A DECISIVE PHASE IN AN OLD DEBATE?**
- 19 **1. CHOOSING COLONIAL COLLECTIONS**
Crucial meeting in Bamako – A find at customs in the port of Rotterdam – A magic cross at Brussels Airport – A strong European network – Colonial collections in the cold
- 28 **2. THE GREAT HERITAGE MIGRATION**
The pain of loss – Massive flow – Collecting boom – Objects on demand – Loot – Enforced donations – Collecting expeditions and missionary collecting – Gradual turnaround – Role of diaspora organisations – Organisations in the Netherlands – Adieu La Belgique à papa, goodbye VOC mentality
- 48 **3. MUSEUMS IN MOTION**
In search of a new role – Amputated biographies – A gift from Congo – Sri Lankan expert vs. Dutch museum director – The large grey area – The art of letting go
- 66 **4. THE ‘SANS-PAPIERS’ OF COLONIALISM**
Silent observers – Fascination with the other – Better do it secretly – Zoo of humans – A U-turn in racial theories – A museum’s headache file – King Badu Bonsu II – Wanted: a memorial place



80 **PART II THRIFTY RETURNS IN THE 1970S**

82 **5. INDONESIA, THE NETHERLANDS AND DIPONEGORO'S KRIS**

A find – Arduous negotiations – Secret mission – Joint Recommendations – The homecoming of 'Asia's Mona Lisa' – The search for the stabbing weapon – Little cooperation – Turning point 2017 – Where does the Java man belong? – A rich museum in Jakarta

99 **6. CONGO, BELGIUM AND LEOPOLD'S TROUBLESOME LEGACY**

Many small wars – Collecting under Leopold II – Did collecting change after Leopold II? – 'Poisoned gift' – Restitution negotiations – Three-phase plan – Poor outcome – A new tone

116 **7. SURINAME, THE CARIBBEAN AND THE NETHERLANDS: MORE RETURNS ON THE WAY?**

The Dutch West India Company – Colonial collections from WIC areas – Archives from Suriname: returned as agreed – Pre-Columbian shards back to Curaçao and Aruba – Curse on a Maroon chair – New impulse?

125 **PART III RECENT RETURNS**

127 **8. THE CAMPAIGN FOR MĀORI HEADS**

Family members in the shop window – Stumbling blocks – To whom do you give it back? – Transfer sealed with a nose kiss – Another Toi Moko repatriated – Three Māori heads in the process of repatriation.

138 **9. FRUITFUL COOPERATION AROUND ARCHIVES**

Archiving frenzy – Indonesia: a pragmatic approach – Rwanda: digital access only – Discussion about digital return



148 **10. FAREWELL TO OVER 18,000 OBJECTS FROM THE MUSEUM NUSANTARA**

The pain of Delft – Necessary: time and manpower – Indonesia's happiness – Even more pain in Delft – The Asia Cultural Center in South Korea becomes the largest recipient – A new sound

161 **11. BENIN DIALOGUE GROUP: A MODEL FOR A EUROPEAN APPROACH?**

A quiet bench in front of a restless display case – It's about people – Perplexing wanders – Do the Bini miss their objects? – Ahead of the Benin dialogue – Tensions among European dialogue partners – Tensions among Nigerian dialogue partners – Benin objects in the Netherlands and Belgium – Does a European approach work?

177 **PART IV PRIVATE COLLECTIONS – LESS VISIBLE, BUT NOT LESS IMPORTANT**

178 **12. MISSIONARY ORGANISATIONS AND SUPERFLUOUS COLLECTIONS**

African voices – Colonial triangle – Mission in Dutch colonies and in Congo – Local help – Resistance – Mitigation – Missed opportunities – Limited returns

190 **13. COLONIAL OBJECTS IN TRADE AND IN PRIVATE OWNERSHIP**

Contact with traders – Early war booty and grave robbery – The role of elite families – Two collectors' associations – Question marks over a Buddha's head – The future of the Christoffel collection – Successful restitution by a private individual – The bell of the Jaffna fort – Paintings from royal property



206 **PART V TOWARDS A NEW ETHICS**

208 **14. LESSONS FROM SETTLER COLONIES AND THE RESTITUTION OF NAZI-LOOTED ART**

An object from 1613 disappears – A specific approach – UN Declaration supporting indigenous claims – Principles for claiming Nazi looted art – What about claims from former colonies?

218 **15. TRUST, EQUALITY AND JUSTICE**

Turnaround in the Netherlands – Surprise from Belgium – Again: to whom do you give back? – How do we know if we are making progress? – Unlearning to distrust – Working towards equality – Undoing injustice

231 Acknowledgements

233 Works cited

243 Index



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PREFACE

Slowly but surely we are realising that we are not finished with colonialism. Increasingly, we are confronted with the ways in which centuries of European expansion continue to distort the world. Think, for example, of the history of slavery, inequality or racism. This book is about another important aspect of colonialism: the great heritage migration, the relocation of countless cultural and historical treasures. Colonisers took not only the land, what grew on it and everything that was below the ground, but also the cultural possessions of the colonised. Many of these were taken without the knowledge of the people in the colonial regions, or against their will. Everything – from great treasures, gleaming armoury and ritual power sculptures to simple utilitarian objects – was shipped from afar to museums and private collections in the Global North. Additionally, miles of (often strategic) archives, as well as numerous ancestral skeletons and other body-parts, dug from graves, prisons, hospitals and other places, were moved to these collections.

It was almost always a one-way street: the uninvited ruler robbing his new subjects. The period of European colonialism represents a peak period in the history of art robbery, its consequences still visible and tangible today, both in the northern and southern hemispheres. Depots in the north overflow with the remains of ancestors whom it is no longer possible to identify, and archives of the colonial administration and of local leaders that are still being disputed. Countries, peoples and communities in the Global South are missing what is dear to them.

This book is about how the Netherlands and Belgium deal with colonial collections that were acquired in a dubious manner. Both countries



are looking for new ways to do this, the biggest surprise coming with the decision of the Belgian federal government, in June 2021, to declare objects in the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren which we can be certain were looted to be the property of the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter, DR Congo). Belgium and DR Congo will start an investigation into tens of thousands of other objects that also may have been looted and might likewise become property of DR Congo. In early 2021, the Dutch government caused a stir with a new policy vision: colonial collections that were acquired illegally return to their country of origin if that country so requests.

In the former colonies of both countries too, things are in motion. DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Indonesia, Suriname and the Caribbean islands each deal with the restitution issue in their own way and at their own pace. Since their independence, they have strived to regain some of their lost treasures. They have developed their own heritage policy, strengthened their museums and investigated the value of this new openness in countries like the Netherlands and Belgium, and with some modest results. In 2021, Nigeria and Germany agreed that Benin objects – looted in 1897 by British soldiers and presently displayed in German museums – would be returned. Several museums in Great Britain also announced their willingness to let go their Benin objects.

In this process, moral and historical considerations have become more important than strictly legal ones to the question of to whom an object belongs to. Some governments and museums in the Western world – Europe, North America and Australia – increasingly feel that they are no longer the rightful owners of objects that were brought back from distant regions in the past and want to discuss this with their counterparts in these former colonies. In private museums and the collections of individuals, however, this is less apparent.

TWO COUNTRIES IN ONE BOOK

Since the early 1990s, I have been studying the protection of and threats to the cultural heritage of the South, and for more than ten years, I have focused on heritage that was moved away in the colonial past. Frequent travels in Asia, Africa and Europe have provided contacts that have deepened my insights. I am Dutch but have known Belgium's major ethnographic museums for a long time and worked closely with curators and academics in both countries. Admittedly, there are significant



differences between their colonial pasts. One operated mainly in Africa and to a lesser extent in Asia; the other in Africa, Asia and America. The Netherlands waged major wars in Asia; Belgium fought many small-scale conflicts in Central Africa. The Netherlands was a world player for a long time, but had already passed its colonial peak when Belgium had yet to spread its colonial wings. It did so only after 1830, when it had shaken off the Dutch yoke and left the kingdom.

Most academics and heritage professionals in the two countries know little about what is happening on the other side of the border. They follow the developments in France, Germany and Great Britain more closely than those of their small neighbouring country. As a result, they miss a lot. For me, comparison is not about establishing a hierarchy and concluding that one country is doing better than another; no, comparing is about enriching. By viewing developments and events in one country alongside similar events in another, we gain a clearer perspective on the progress in the decolonisation of colonial collections in each country.

This book shows the part played by both countries during a peak period of art robbery. What did colonial officials, soldiers, entrepreneurs, bringers of the Word, scientists and adventurers all take with them? What did the loss mean to the people who saw their cultural possessions disappear and how does it affect their descendants? Was it looting in all cases? And how do Belgium and the Netherlands go about giving it back? Are there any successful examples? Yes, there are. Have requests been rejected? Yes, this has also happened. In answering these questions, I look at and listen to both sides – the Global South and the Global North – as much as possible.

Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium makes clear what the two countries and their former colonies are doing to undo the injustice of art robbery, and places this topic in a broader European and global context. Although from the outside, this work may look different in Belgium and the Netherlands, the two countries are largely walking the same bumpy road and at a similar speed. Some commentators say they are moving at a snail's pace, while others say they are gaining momentum.

IN SEARCH OF A FRAMEWORK

One of the difficult parts of this book was to come up with a framework to see if real progress was being made in the restitution dossier. It is



undeniable that the southern and northern hemispheres are in conflict over this period of art robbery. But how do you know if that conflict is really coming any closer to a resolution? What is striking is that many countries and peoples in the southern hemisphere are still suffering as a result of the violations of trust during the period of colonialism. They struggle with the inequality in their relationship with European countries. Distrust and inequality are ingrained. In their view, few people in Europe see historical injustice or feel how cultural losses affect people in former colonies.

Trust, equality and justice form the framework for testing whether these injustices are, slowly but surely, being reversed. Or perhaps we might put it better: to what extent is distrust being diminished, inequality being reduced and the distribution of objects being done in a way that ensures some of the injustice of the colonial period is undone?

The Netherlands, Belgium and other former colonisers seem to be working to undo some of these historical injustices. Whether this is a turning point we will only know in years to come. For the present, this work is more words, advice and policy documents than deeds. We would never again take valuables from the palaces of defeated monarchs, from temples or from ancestral altars, we now say explicitly. But have the former colonies seen much return? Do they trust that it will return and that they will have control over their own past?

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Writing is deleting, scraping and polishing. What remain are the stories of people, communities, museums and governments from the southern and northern hemispheres about a centuries-old episode in our common history.

This research started with an effort to map how all those hundreds of thousands of items from colonial areas came to be in our two countries. In a few cases, we know this fairly precisely, but in most we do not. Immediately after their independence, former colonies started asking for the return of their cultural heritage. This did yield some results, but half a century later and in the light of what we now know, these results are dubious. In recent years, some ancestral remains, colonial collections and colonial archives have been returned, and this research reconstructs how this was done in specific cases. The book also surveys the collections from colonial areas of missionary institutions and private individuals and

examines how they fit into the current restitution debate. This research also led me to posit a rarely made comparison with other categories of looted art.

To be clear: this book does not argue that everything that was ever taken should be returned to former colonial possessions. That would be an oversimplification of a difficult problem. It is about restoring damaged relationships and, in some cases, embarking on a more equal relationship.

Since 2009, I have focused my research on colonial collections and their restitution. The introductory Part I, 'A decisive phase in an old debate?', explains why. It shows which items came to the Netherlands and Belgium in the colonial period and the pain and anger over their loss in the countries where they were created and used. It pays attention to how more and more museums now struggle with this and how they are increasingly researching the origins of their collections, including the hundreds of thousands of ancestral remains from colonial territories.

Considerably more than half a century ago, the newly independent countries of Indonesia and DR Congo negotiated the return of some pieces. This is the topic of Part II, 'Thrifty restitution in the 1970s.' How did Indonesia and DR Congo enter into the negotiations and how did the Netherlands and Belgium try to shape arrangements to their liking? What did they return and what would they not? What motivated the two former colonisers to return objects? This section also investigates how the Netherlands and Belgium dealt with their other former colonies – Suriname, the Caribbean islands, Rwanda and Burundi.

In Part III, the book moves on to the twenty-first century and reviews some 'Recent restitutions' (or plans for them). It begins with a high-profile transfer: the repatriation of a tattooed Māori head to New Zealand. This section then discusses the issue of trying to hold onto and having to let go of colonial archives that are crucial to both parties is discussed and gives comments about how we might offer collections that are superfluous here *en masse* to former colonies. Finally, it discusses the dialogue between European museums and Nigeria about an iconic spoil of war, the Benin objects. Can this dialogue become a model for the return of other looted objects from the same former colony that have been dispersed all over Europe?

Up until this point, the book has mainly discussed collections in public institutions. Part IV, 'Private collections – Less visible, but not less important', pays attention to collections and pieces that were once

brought back by missionaries. The fact that we often know little about them does not mean that they are any less significant weight than public collections. Do missionary institutions also deal with returns? And what about dealers and private individuals who have precious pieces from colonial regions? Do these collections include dubiously acquired objects, and how do we find out? Do the best-known private owners of the Netherlands and Belgium – the Royal houses – also own colonial collections, and are they open to return?

Europeans not only played a leading role in art theft from far away colonies in the southern hemisphere; they also did so during two other periods in history: the robbery from the oldest inhabitants of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States and Canada, and the Nazi art thefts of the Second World War. What claimants of looted art from those distant colonies can learn from plaintiffs in cases of looted art from these other two historical moments is the first issue addressed in Part v, 'Towards a New Ethics'. In the concluding chapter, the book looks at the core issue of return: it should break down distrust and restore trust, reduce inequality and, as much as possible, undo the injustice of colonial looted art. Return is a way of healing.

Please, join me on my journey. I hope you will enjoy it.

Jos van Beurden

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