BOOK REVIEW:
Dan Hicks, The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution

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As the UK government wrestles with the identity and direction of the devolved nations post-Brexit, the emotive issue of national sovereignty has conjured up images of a past when Great Britain’s imperial rule is seen as both benign and benevolent and the British Empire a force for good across the globe. Dan Hicks’s The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution disavows that view and exposes the brutal, voracious and relentless appetite for power and wealth that fuelled Britain’s imperial ambitions. Extractive, militarist corporate companies as epitomised by the East India Company and the particular focus of this book, the Royal Niger Company, led the way in securing British interests, whether political or economic, before giving way to the various offices of government administration.¹ The evidence of what Hicks refers to as a brutish history of acquisition during a period he names World War Zero – essentially a prequel to World War I, a period when, as Hicks points out, Britain undertook overseas military campaigns in every year of Queen Victoria’s rule – can be seen across anthropology museums in the UK, whose collections he goes on to argue are built on necrographies: ‘death histories, histories of loss’. Hicks further equates anthropological museums as an implement or weapon of imperialism and states that the colonial museum has failed.

¹ The United African Company was founded in 1879 and modelled on the East India Company; it became known as the National African Company in 1881 and was renamed the Royal Niger Company in 1886
Through a focussed and compelling examination of the sacking of Benin City in 1897, *The Brutish Museums* questions the role of anthropological or ethnographic museums such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford as devices for extending, repeating and intensifying violence, in effect promulgating the concept of Western superiority, acting as weapons in the bristling arsenal of Victorian colonialism. Can they ever, he asks, through conventional methods of display and interpretation be neutral containers of a universal heritage? Identifying the colonial museum as a failure, a device conceived to legitimise white supremacy, Hicks calls on them to become sites of conscience through acts of cultural restitution and reparations. Challenging notions of equal exchange, he posits: ‘To our collective disciplinary and professional shame, no anthropological theory of looting, plunder, and dispossession has been written.’

As Senior Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum himself, as well as a Fellow of St Cross College and Professor of Archaeology at the University of Oxford, Hicks is ideally placed to make these statements and to question the role of museums in the current climate. A reframing is now required of the former director of the British Museum Neil MacGregor’s position that ‘telling history through things is what museums are for. And because the British Museum has for over 250 years been collecting things from all round the globe, it is not a bad place to start if you want to use objects to tell a history of the world.’ Ultimately, the point Hicks raises in *The Brutish Museums* is that it is no longer the right of the Western anthropological museum to control the narrative as it represents an outdated and imperial history – a history of dubious acquisitions and questionable rights of ownership, coupled with misleading or disingenuous interpretation. Those histories have to be told from multiple perspectives. The key question is, as Richard Ovenden asks, ‘who controls the histories of the former colonies: the newly independent nations or the former colonial powers?’ The absence of information around how an object was acquired, for instance, presents a particular challenge; and at the Pitt Rivers Museum itself, the Labelling Matters initiative is discovering that anthropological museum catalogues and acquisitions records are embedded with racist terminology.

At the core of *The Brutish Museums* is a finely researched examination and impassioned account of the events that lead from the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, when the European imperial powers met and divided the African continent between them – an event known as the ‘Scramble for Africa’ – to the sacking of Benin City by British military troops in 1897 and the rampant looting of its priceless material culture. This was one of a number of brutal and inhumane assaults on African peoples, including the establishment of the Congo Free State in 1885 by Leopold II of Belgium and where the atrocities carried out on the enslaved labour working the rubber plantations were uncovered by the British Consul Roger Casement and

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presented in a report to the British Parliament in 1904. Another was the Second Boer War (1899–1902), which saw the introduction of breech-loading rifles and machine guns into the theatre of war for the first time, and used to devastating effect in the punitive raid on Benin City as well. The British forces also used barbed wire to fence their internment centres (sometimes referred to as concentration camps) during the same campaign. The German Schutztruppe (protection force) in German Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia) carried out the first genocide of the twentieth century against the Herero and Nama peoples.\(^5\) Furthermore, during World War I there was widespread abuse of Black African men who were used in their hundreds of thousands as forced labour, as carriers and little more than beasts of burden for the transportation of goods, weapons and equipment for both the British and German armies.

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5 See the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Bibliographies, Herero and Nama Genocide www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/german-schutztruppe
In the most devastating section of the book, Hicks argues convincingly that the assault on Benin City was premeditated, even though Britain had been a participant in the 1874 Conference of Brussels, which established ‘the principles of humanization of war’ and explicitly prohibited unnecessary suffering, unannounced attacks, the destruction of culturally significant buildings and the seizure of property and pillage. Although the Brussels Declaration, a forerunner to the Hague Convention of 1899, was never ratified, it clearly established acceptable parameters of conduct during conflict. As Hicks demonstrates, all of these principles were ignored in the attack on Benin City. The Royal Niger Company, keen to exploit the wealth of natural resources controlled by the Royal Court of the Obas (rulers) of Benin City, had seen diplomatic overtures that aimed to gain access to these commodities consistently rebuffed from the time of the first approach made by Richard Burton in 1862. The British coveted access to the minerals, the wild rubber, palm oil, gum copal and gum Arabic, and the profits they promised, but this had been consistently denied by the Oba. Hicks argues that in order to secure these riches, the punitive raid on Benin City had been planned years in advance and lead to an alliance between the Niger Coast Protectorate and the Royal Niger Company. A deliberate act of provocation was planned in the form of a mission formed of a group of nine white men led by James Phillips, the Acting Consul General, plus their 250 Black African servants, who left Gwato for Benin City in October 1896, deliberately ignoring warnings that they were not welcome and would not be received. Four of the white men, including Phillips and a large number of the accompanying Black African servants, were killed en route. The fate of a further three white men remains unknown, but two of the nine survived. Consequently, the Niger Coast Protectorate unleashed a ferocious and grossly disproportionate attack on Benin City that saw excessive loss of life, the complete destruction of the city, the exile of the Oba and the obliteration of religious buildings. This led to the subsequent looting of thousands of historic ancestral and religious objects of inestimable value, and to the destruction of their provenance – ie the context of their original location, their association with other objects and methods of display or storage. The entire city was razed and the context of its richly documented past recorded through carved ivory and bronzes destroyed.

The book includes a partial inventory of the Benin bronzes, which are now spread across multiple countries in both public and private collections. Hicks refers to a possible total of 10,000 looted objects (bronzes, ivories and other objects), a fraction of which are held in 161 museums and galleries across the world. The majority remain in private and family collections. Hicks calls for them to become agents of the repositioning of anthropological museums as a means of coming to terms with Britain’s Victorian colonial-militarist past through acts of restitution, reparation and reconciliation. These are laudable aims, and already indications are that the French and German governments, now joined by the University of Aberdeen,⁶ are

leading the way in restituting the bronzes that have come to epitomise the very worst aspects surrounding the acquisition of objects during the colonial period. Given that Nigeria first officially requested the return of these objects in 1936, taking concerted action to redress this particular wrong is long overdue. Long admired in museums in Europe and the USA, many of these bronzes are also held in private collections, an issue exacerbated by their high market values. The so-called Ohly head, for example, purchased for £230 by Ernest Ohly in 1951 and subsequently stored in a bank vault until 2016, was recently sold for a record £10m.7

Hicks is right to focus on the Benin bronzes, given the infamous surrounding their acquisition. Any process of reconciliation has to begin somewhere, and continuing to ignore the problem and hope that it might go away is no longer an option. The UK’s Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in an interview with the Greek newspaper Ta Nea, recently reiterated that ‘the UK government has a firm longstanding position on the [Parthenon] sculptures, which is that they were legally acquired by Lord Elgin under the appropriate laws of the time and have been legally owned by the British Museum’s trustees since their acquisition’.8 Similarly, the current Communities Secretary, Robert Jenrick, in an announcement concerning new laws specifically aimed at protecting public sculpture from the fate that befell the contentious statue of the slaver Edward Colston in Bristol in the summer of 2020, stated that ‘we cannot – and should not – now try to edit or censor our past’. He goes on to say that we need to avoid repeating ‘the errors of previous generations, losing our inheritance of the past without proper care’.9 This doubling down on calls to re-evaluate the impact of British colonialism and the very visible reminders that are seen on the streets in the form of statues, and in the holdings of public museums, is stifling, and reveals a nation uneasy with taking the first steps towards recognising its murky and insalubrious past. The issues around enslavement, colonialism and their continuing legacies are not going to magically disappear, despite the wishes of those such as Johnson and Jenrick. Indeed, there is an urgency about these issues that needs, as France and Germany have demonstrated, to come from the top, bearing the authority of the state. The alacrity with which slave owners were compensated, a clause written into the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 and enshrined in the Slave Compensation Act of 1837 which required 40 per cent of the Treasury’s annual income at the time (and included a £15 million loan that was only paid off in 2015), stands in stark contrast, for example, to the persistent foot dragging that led to people taking direct action against the Colston statue after years of legitimate petitioning for its removal. The debate, meanwhile, about the fate of the statue of Cecil Rhodes on the


façade of Oriel College at the University of Oxford has been grinding on, although the College has said (in May 2021) that it will not remove the statue.10 These issues should not be reduced to binary decisions but should form part of an ongoing debate, such as that posited by Hicks in this volume around the contentious Benin bronzes, and one that could lead to positive, meaningful and lasting change.

The book’s narrow focus is one of its strengths, but it is worth remembering that the punitive raid, usually supported by the Royal Navy, was not a new practice for the British colonial forces but it found favour as a deliberate tactic used as a weapon of retribution and as intimidation: such challenges to the rule of the British Empire, or resistance to conforming to its rule, would not be tolerated. Such events also acted as channels for the subsequent acquisition of objects into European hands such as the French and Germans, who likewise had voracious appetites for the collection and display of antiquities from across the world. In 1889, for instance, Captain (later Admiral) Edward H W Davis, commander of the HMS Royalist, led a raid against villages on the Roviana lagoon in the Solomon Islands in reprisal for the killing two years earlier of three members of a British trading vessel (a white trader and two Pacific islanders). Individuals were shot, buildings set on fire, canoes destroyed and ancestral and ritual objects looted. Among them was a communal feast bowl in the form of a salt-water crocodile from a Kalikoqu village. Davis took and catalogued this and other looted items as part of his private collection, later selling or distributing them to friends. The feast bowl entered the collections of the British Museum in 1903 (Oc1903.1007.1).11

Not only were the Royal Navy active participants in many such raids but they also acted as agents for the transportation of looted, or otherwise acquired, objects back to Great Britain. Although it is not clear under what circumstances he acquired them, Commodore Richard Ashmore Powell brought two statues back from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in 1868 on HMS Topaze. Both were gifted by the Admiralty to Queen Victoria. Hoa Hakananai’a (Oc1869,1005.1) and Moai Hava (Oc1869,1006.1) were accessioned by the British Museum the following year. In 2018, the Chilean government petitioned the British Museum for the return of these sacred, ancestral objects.

One criticism I would make of The Brutish Museums concerns when, late in the book, Hicks states that ‘the suffering of the Continent of Africa at the hands of extractive militarist corporate colonialism throws up different circumstances from those of settler colonialism in the Pacific or the Americas’.12 Yet the history of colonialism across the Pacific and the Americas is rife with similar examples of death, destruction, exploitation, suppression of resistance, expropriation and the imposition of colonial rule. Despite the nature of the European

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11 Nicholas Thomas and Peter Brunt, eds, Oceania, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2018, p 307
12 Hicks, The Brutish Museums, op cit, p 232
colonisation of Africa, it is hard to accept that the reality of the imposition of colonial rule elsewhere was any different. As in Africa, indigenous communities were torn apart, whether through invasion, the transmission of disease, unprovoked violence, rapacious greed, land theft, usurpation of religious and political rulers, the imposition of punitive tax regimes, and countless other atrocities and indignities, the repercussions of which still resonate today.

Indeed, the attack on and subsequent looting of Benin City has powerful parallels with another colonial enterprise that took place some four hundred years earlier. Following Cristobal Colón’s ‘discovery’ of America in 1492 (most likely to have been the Taíno island now known as the Dominican Republic), the Spanish and Portuguese signed the Treaty of Tordesillas two years later, effectively dividing the newly discovered continent between them, taking the division from a point set along a meridian 370 leagues west of Cabo Verde: to the east of the line, territory would belong to Portugal; to the west, to Spain. In 1519, Hernán Cortés and his cohort of European mercenaries left Cuba illegally and entered what would become known as Mexico and claimed it for the Spanish King, Carlos V (who, like his British counterparts, never set foot in the Americas). Named Nueva España (New Spain), Cortés recruited local support through such groups as the Tlaxcalans who had successfully resisted the dominant rule of the Mexica (Aztec). Together with the European mercenaries, they descended on Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica. It was a city, as described by Cortés and one of his supporting officers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, of superlatives. Nonetheless, the European invaders, disregarding local conventions and customs, and using the moral outrage of human sacrifice and the power of the priesthood (an excuse likewise levied against the priesthood of Benin City), attacked and destroyed the city using their superior weaponry that included muskets and small cannon, as well as horses (unknown previously in the Americas), and aided, albeit unknowingly, through the fatal impact of smallpox and European flu on the indigenous Mexicans. Cortés and his men initially entered the city as guests but they soon kidnapped and held to ransom the Mexica tlatoani (ruler), Moctezuma, ultimately causing his death under contested circumstances. Moctezuma’s body, as recorded in the Florentine Codex, was unceremoniously dumped in a nearby canal. Ambushed, the Spaniards left the city but returned to lay waste to it, capturing the new tlatoani, Cuauhtemoc, who they tortured and executed before taking as much gold (which included the non-negotiable tax, the royal quinto or fifth, ie 20 per cent, set aside for the Spanish crown) and other valuables as they could carry with them. Cortés himself also had a 20 per cent share. The officers, including Díaz del Castillo (who would later become Governor of Guatemala), expressed dismay at their share, many deciding it was not worth having.13 Even before Cortés had landed in Mexico, Carlos V had signed a charter in 1518 allowing slaves from Africa to be shipped directly to the Americas, rather than through the European ports that facilitated the plantations across the Caribbean and North America. Thus, there was nothing pacific about settler colonialism

across the Americas, North and South, nor about the impact it had on the indigenous communities. The deep wounds left by those experiences over five hundred years ago are, like those felt across Africa, still raw and painful and the scars remain, unhealed.

As Hicks makes clear in *The Brutish Museums*, the dialogue going forward, both internally and externally, whether as a museum or as a nation, needs to change. Looted objects, he argues, need to be returned. Yet, it is worth noting that many indigenous communities feel it is positive to see their objects in museums, where they acknowledge that, in certain cases, they serve as ambassadors, representing their history, religion and communities and making people aware of the riches of their culture. Long term loans, engagement with contemporary artists, the reappraising of works held in museums and providing comprehensive information around their acquisition, are starting points, as is the imperative of including new voices and perspectives. Many other questions remain, however, over the fate of the huge volume of objects kept in storage that are rarely seen and often remain uncatalogued. There is much to do, but Hicks demonstrates that museum professionals do have an appetite to lay down the foundations for these tasks. A new dialogue with new voices and full representation must be placed at the very heart of that process. In Benin City, for example, the Legacy Restoration Trust (LRT) has commissioned Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye to design the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) to house some of those thousands of objects taken in 1897 during that act of wilful vandalism. Hicks says ‘let us reimagine and reinstate the anthropological, archaeological and world culture museum as a site of conscience, of transitional and restorative justice, and of cultural memory’. Who could argue with that?

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