

## Action time on art restitution claims

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Eleni Polycarpou

PARTNER | UK

**CATEGORY:**

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Zambia's claim against the UK for the restitution of Rhodesian Man, a skull that could be up to 300,000 years old, serves well to remind us of the much larger ongoing debate about what museums should do in the face of the growing number of claims from more and more 'source' countries for the restitution of artworks and artefacts which they say belong to them.

On one side of the debate, museums say that an object on display is viewed by millions in the context of where it sits in the development of world culture. After all, the movement of art across the world has since ancient times brought pleasure, education and cultural exchange and that is something to be facilitated and valued.

On the other side of the debate, some of these claims (but not all, and museums are well placed to make that judgment) relate to items which the 'source' countries say are critical to the identity of that country. Western governments should treat dealing with these claims as opportunities to enter into proper dialogues with the 'source' countries to heal wounds and to acknowledge that everyone has moved on.

The UK Government is one of the key targets for these claims because of the huge volume of artworks held by museums in the UK that have come from literally all around the world. The UK is well-known for hiding behind various legal arguments to, so far, successfully resist such claims and close them down all together. However, the mood of public opinion is changing and the UK's agreement to enter into bilateral discussions with Zambia is a welcome development. Its refusal to disclose documents from 1972 may be well founded because everything has changed since then, but it will nonetheless create a negative impression unless it is accompanied by some positive action.

Many press reports have highlighted that this item is invaluable to researchers who are still trying to work out how modern humans evolved and that access to it for research is a key issue in this case; African researchers have said that they would welcome its presence in Zambia for the same reason. There is undoubtedly a solution here, be it a return to Zambia but loaned to the Natural History Museum for some of the time, with unlimited access to scientists, or the other way round.

Restitution claims for ancient cultural objects are always complex and each must be examined and dealt with on its own merits and better dealt with on the political level in the end. By way of example, many countries around the world have passed comprehensive immunity from seizure legislation covering international art loans for exhibitions where certain conditions are met. This has led to a huge growth in the travel of art, which will always be a welcome development.

However, when contested ancient objects are lent to other countries, this can often inflame sensitivities. The immunity from seizure legislation can be a tool in these restitution claims and can be developed accordingly. After all, it is generally fairly new (in the UK it was passed in 2007) and can be developed in the right direction to allow these extraordinary artefacts to make their way back to the 'source' country, even if it is on a temporary basis.

The current COVID-19 crisis and the temporary closure of museums across the world gives museums an opportunity to spend the time to look at these claims with a fresh perspective and to persuade their governments to resolve them transparently and elegantly so that when they re-open they can do so on a fresh basis, ethically and with heads held high.


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# Authors

Eleni Polycarpou

PARTNER | LONDON

Litigation and arbitration

 +44 20 7597 6157

 [eleni.polycarpou@withersworldwide.com](mailto:eleni.polycarpou@withersworldwide.com)