

Conservation and the Weight of History

Beatrice Harvey

The director of the Trust, Hilary McGrady, claims that history can be “contentious.” What does this mean? If we can have disagreement about these facts, how do we determine which accounts are legitimate and which ones are not?

Conservation organizations like the National Trust maintain that preserving historical sites, documents, artifacts, and so forth is a valuable pursuit. But what is it exactly that makes it valuable? That is, what do we gain from having access to historical artifacts? Is there a way in which these benefits conflict with one another?

What obligation might conservation organizations have to educate people about the origin of historical sites or artifacts if they were created or obtained via colonialism, violence, or oppression? What is the harm in failing to provide people with this kind of context?

British Historian William Dalrymple suggests that refusing to repatriate these artifacts is no different than refusing to return the art looted by the Nazis. Do you believe the two situations are analogous? Why or why not?