

John Oliver recap John Oliver

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John Oliver on stolen antiquities in western museums: 'Abject callousness on display'

The Last Week Tonight host digs into the history of stolen artifacts and the market in dubiously sourced antiquities



John Oliver: 'Museums should be getting asked hard questions about every aspect of their acquisition process.' Photograph: YouTube



Adrian Horton

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John Oliver tore into western museums and their collections of stolen artifacts, as well as the present antiquities market, on Sunday's Last Week Tonight. Antiquities from the global south - particularly Latin America, the Middle East and Africa - have been stolen and enshrined in European and American museums "on a much larger scale than you may realize", he explained. A 2018 report commissioned by the French president, for example, found that over 90% of all Africa's cultural heritage was held outside Africa by major museums, which have sprawling collections of "essentially stolen goods".

Museums: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)



“We don’t have time to recap the entire history of colonialism and the plunder of antiquities - there are so, so many stolen artifacts that we could talk about tonight,” said Oliver, but in order “to say a lot with a little” he focused on the British Museum. “Honestly, if you’re ever looking for a missing artifact, nine times out of 10 it’s in the British Museum,” he noted. “It’s basically the world’s largest lost and found with both ‘lost’ and ‘found’ in the heaviest possible quotation marks.”

The British Museum and others purport to be places of noble intent, where world treasures can reach the largest possible audience. “That notion of museums as a place for people to connect with our shared history and with cultures all over the world clearly isn’t fundamentally bad,” Oliver explained. “But it’s also not wholly representative of the actual history of how many museums came to be.”

He pointed to the British Museum’s original patron, [Sir Hans Sloane](#), who was married to the heiress of Jamaican sugar plantations worked by enslaved people. Sloane bought much of his collection with that wealth, “meaning that the museum’s very foundations are inextricably tied up with slavery and colonialism”, said Oliver.

Oliver noted several stock responses from western institutions to the question of returning stolen artifacts. First, that such artifacts were acquired at a different time, and one can’t judge the present by the standards of the past.

Except, as Oliver pointed out, people knew it was an ethical crime back then. After the British army raided an Ethiopian kingdom in 1868 with a British Museum representative in tow to bid on the choicest items, the [British prime minister said](#) he “deeply lamented ... that these articles were thought fit to be brought away by a British army” and urged that they be held only until they were restored.

“He was saying that in 1868,” Oliver exclaimed. “We didn’t even know how to fix a UTI without leeches back then, but we knew that raiding other countries for their shit was ‘deeply lamentable’, which is British for ‘super fucked up’.”

Another argument is that stolen artifacts would be safer under the care of western institutions than in their home countries, but the caretaking record at some museums is “mixed at best”, said Oliver. The Elgin marbles taken from Greece at the British Museum, he noted, were permanently damaged by wire brushes and a harsh cleaning agent in the 1930s.

Then there’s the argument that these museums are a repository for world treasures open to everyone, which is “only true if you can get to the museum in question, and also it’s worth noting that most display only a tiny fraction of their collections”, said Oliver. The British Museum, for example, has a collection of about 8m objects, but just 80,000 of them are on display. “It

can be pretty galling for people to find that their heritage, which is often part of a vibrant present-day culture, is sitting in storage in the British Museum's underground loot prison."

Antiquities theft is not a crime of the past - "this practice is still very much going on", Oliver explained, shifting his attention to the modern antiquities market, which includes disreputable dealers of stolen goods and museums or auction houses, such as Sotheby's, performing cursory provenance research.

Many deals use prolific western institutions "to launder their reputation", Oliver said, such as Subhash Kapoor, a former leading source of Asian arts for museums; the Met currently has 86 items from him in its collection. Kapoor has been identified as a trafficker of stolen goods with thin cover stories, most commonly that objects had come from the family collection of his girlfriend. "You might be thinking, 'that is so stupid, it would only work on a collection of real ding-dongs,' to which I'd say you're absolutely right. It seems to have worked on the Met 86 times," said Oliver.

"There's just a level of abject callousness on display here, which to be fair, some institutions are finally coming to terms with," he continued. "The fact is, museums should be getting asked hard questions about every aspect of their acquisition process and their collections as part of a long-overdue conversation about where their items came from and whether anyone wants them back.

"That conversation should be led by the groups those items originally belong to, because while obviously museums should not be violating the law, they shouldn't be violating basic moral decency either," he concluded. "There is so much we need to do to reckon with the harms both past and present of colonialism, but this should really be the easy part."

In the meantime, Oliver offered an alternative: a virtual tour, hosted by Kumail Nanjiani, of the Payback Museum - "the first public museum in the world devoted to providing recourse to nations who've been plundered of their greatest treasures throughout history by colonial dickheads".

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