

Longing for Belongings

Returning sovereignty of cultural belongings in British museums to Indigenous Australian communities

By Harriet Gilbert Savage
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Published by: Young Fabians
info@youngfabians.org.uk
www.youngfabians.org.uk
Young Fabians
61 Petty France
London, UK, SW1H 9EU

Contents

Note on terminology and acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	7
Recommendation 1: The UK Government should amend deaccessioning laws for national museums	10
Recommendation 2: UK museums should evolve the museum paradigm	14
Recommendation 3: UK museums should establish a consortium for collections of Indigenous Australian belongings	18
Recommendation 4: UK museums should establish a national fellowship programme for Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners	22
Conclusion	24

“It’s why we call them belongings. Because it’s got the word longing in it.” – Gerald McMaster, curator, artist and Plains Cree member of the Siksika Nation

Note on terminology

Ancestors are the bodies of Indigenous Australian peoples, many of which are held in UK museums. In European contexts, these bodies may be referred to as ‘human remains’ or ‘ancestral remains’.

Country refers to the lands, waterways and seas to which Indigenous Australian peoples are connected. The term acknowledges the far-reaching relationships Indigenous Australian peoples have with place, including culture, spirituality, custom and identity.

Cultural belongings is a term that refers to things that have been created or modified by the efforts of humans. In this instance, these things include – but are not limited to – objects, audio visual, artwork and documentary cultural heritage material. This term refers to things that, in European contexts, may be referred to as ‘objects’ or ‘artefacts’, though these terms have been avoided for their failure to acknowledge the enduring connection between these things and their Indigenous Australian Custodians.

Deaccession refers to permanently removing a work of art or cultural belongings from a museum’s collection. In the context of restitution, deaccessioning is the first stage of returning a cultural belonging to its original Custodians.

Indigenous is an adjective used to refer to the first peoples of Australia and its islands, and include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

National museums (UK) are museums funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) of the British Government. There are fourteen national museums, all located in England, and include the British Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Restitution refers to the permanent return of cultural belongings to their traditional lands and Custodians. This process is also referred to as ‘repatriation’ or ‘rematriation’ in quotations within this report, according to the preference of experts consulted. These terms reference the same process, but variation between terms acknowledges differing beliefs regarding the meaning of the process.

Secret, sacred and ceremonial belongings are belongings associated with ceremonial, religious and/or burial purposes; only used or seen by certain people; or sourced from or containing materials that only certain members of the community can use or see. They are defined as secret, sacred and ceremonial according to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions.

Sovereignty expresses the rights of Indigenous Australian peoples that derive from their spiritual and historical connections to the land. These rights refer to land, self-governance and self-determination, among others.

Acronyms and abbreviations

AIATSIS Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

AHRC Arts and Humanities Research Council

RA Royal Academy of Art

RoCH Return of Cultural Heritage

UK United Kingdom

UNDRIP United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

V&A Victoria and Albert Museum

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This report acknowledges that Indigenous sovereignty of the land known as Australia has never been ceded.

All mistakes and errors are my own.

Executive Summary

UK museums hold the largest overseas collection of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings. Many belongings within these collections, however, are unidentified and held in stores, out of sight to the public. While many Indigenous Australian communities are eager to share information about and engage with cultural belongings held in UK institutions, current processes are hostile to their enquiries, often leaving them disempowered. UK museums need to have clear, simple processes of enquiry to establish successful relationships with Indigenous Australian communities. Trust, an essential element of successful relationships, is significantly aided by open communication, knowledge exchange and the offer of unconditional restitution.

Involving Indigenous Australian communities in provenancing, labelling and exhibiting these belongings will forge long-term partnerships between communities and museums, which is a key aspect of returning sovereignty to these communities. These two-way partnerships hold the potential to promote cultural revival, justice and healing within Indigenous Australian communities and to enhance UK museum's understanding, acknowledgement and representation of Indigenous Australian cultures. Embracing such attitudes will allow the UK to harness its relationships with international communities to redefine its position at the centre of global cultural dialogues.

While the culture sector and the public are widely in favour of returning sovereignty of cultural belongings to Indigenous Australian communities, UK museums lack resources, cohesion and governmental support to successfully establish and maintain relationships with these communities. The UK Government must declare a pro-restitution stance and amend deaccessioning restrictions for national museums. These changes will empower UK museums to evolve their paradigms, to establish a consortium for collections of Indigenous Australian belongings and a national fellowship programme for Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners. The Government should support four key initiatives:

Recommendation 1: The UK Government should amend deaccessioning laws for national museums

The UK Government should amend the outdated restrictions of the British Museum Act 1963 and the National Heritage Act 1983 as they prevent national museums from offering unconditional restitution of cultural belongings, which is a key method of building trust with Indigenous Australian communities. The UK Government should:

- Declare a pro-restitution stance
- Amend the British Museum Act 1963 and the National Heritage Act 1983 to return power over deaccessioning to the boards of national museums

Recommendation 2: UK museums should evolve the museum paradigm

UK museums should reconsider their inherently colonial paradigm, integrating Indigenous Australian perspectives that understand cultural belongings as beings unto themselves, rather than as artefacts to be owned. Museums should:

- Revise codes of ethics to reflect Indigenous Australian understandings of cultural belongings
- Ensure that access to stores respects Indigenous Australian beliefs and practices about secret, sacred and ceremonial objects
- Make approaches to documentation and care of collections more flexible to allow for the integration of Indigenous Australian expertise and practices

Recommendation 3: UK museums should establish a consortium for collections of Indigenous Australian belongings

A consortium would draw on Dutch and German models to provide a centralised lead that would manage research, requests and best practice regarding collections of Indigenous Australian belongings. It would be responsible for:

- Digitising UK collections and managing a publicly accessible digital archive
- Funding the co-curation of projects between UK museums and Indigenous Australian communities
- Providing a centralised contact point for restitution requests
- Managing a working group for museums with collections of Indigenous Australian belongings

Recommendation 4: UK museums should establish a national fellowship programme for Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners

For UK museums to faithfully represent Indigenous communities, their staffing bodies must include people with Indigenous perspectives. In a step to increasing the representation of people with Indigenous perspectives in the British cultural sector, UK museums should establish a fellowship programme that offers fellowships to Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners.

These proposals will support reconciliation between the UK and Indigenous Australian communities, in addition to situating the UK at the centre of global dialogues on identity, immigration and environment.

Introduction

Last year, as the UK elected a Labour government after 14 years of Conservative rule, almost 100 other countries around the world held elections in which 70% of incumbents lost power. If 2024 was the year of elections, then 2025 will be the year of redefining the UK's identity both nationally and within a changing international landscape. Gus Casely-Hayford, Director of V&A East, which opens later this year, sees opportunity to define the country's identity by the legacy and potential of its cultural sector: "Let's recast our nation's understanding of itself through a lens of possibility, diversity and creative innovation," he writes. "Let's thoughtfully look backwards to go confidently forward – and do so with pride."¹

Of the top five most visited museums internationally, two are located in the UK and shared a total of over 11.5 million visitors in 2023.² UK museums are, therefore, a primary place in which audiences can reflect on UK and world history through the belongings they exhibit. Many of these belongings were gathered from across the world by individuals or companies acting on the authority of the British Empire and, while some were traded, gifted or bought, others were looted, seized and stolen. The context in which these belongings have been presented in UK museums is, at best, as objects of curiosity and, at worst, as evidence of the country's military, intellectual and cultural supremacy.

While the British Empire declined, the UK's international influence endures, through formal structures such as the Commonwealth of Nations and informal 'soft' power. Yet the presentation of cultural belongings collected in this context supports a narrative of British colonial history. The UK has an obligation to reconsider these cultural belongings, not merely as trophies of British conquest but as ongoing manifestations of cultural and spiritual identity for their original Custodians. Providing space for these diverse narratives is necessary for thoughtful reflection on UK national identity. It is also essential for an enriched understanding of the identities of communities that were impacted by British colonial rule.

One such group of communities are the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands. There were as many as 250 individual nations, each with individual customs, cultures, languages and beliefs, prior to European (predominantly British) colonisation beginning in the 18th century. As of 2020, 33,343 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural belongings were identified as being held in UK institutions – the largest known overseas collection of its kind in the world.³ This number, while substantial, is not a full account of the cultural belongings held in UK institutions, nor is the entry of each cultural belonging complete. A significant proportion of these cultural belongings have no known history and are held in stores, out of sight.

These cultural belongings hold the potential for cultural revival, healing, and justice for Indigenous Australian communities and for UK museums to act as locations of educational expertise on Indigenous Australian traditions to UK and international audiences. Not only does such potential exist, but the British museum sector and the British public strongly support its realisation. In order to fulfil this potential, the Government must firstly declare a pro-restitution stance and amend deaccessioning laws that prevent the restitution of the majority of cultural belongings held in national museums.

This support will then empower UK museums to evolve their paradigms away from colonial structures, integrating Indigenous Australian perspectives into understanding of, engagement with and education about Indigenous Australian cultural belongings. Through this paradigm shift, UK museums will demonstrate that they respect Indigenous Australian communities, as well as their practices, beliefs, and traditions, establishing a foundation of trust upon which UK museums can establish partnerships of equality with Indigenous Australian communities.

These partnerships will be created at a community level through a consortium for collections of Indigenous Australian belongings, which will facilitate engagement and knowledge-sharing between Indigenous Australian communities and UK museums through archive digitisation, co-curation projects and a working group. It will also provide support to Indigenous Australian communities seeking to locate and request the restitution of their cultural belongings.

Such partnerships will also be established at a personal level through a national fellowship programme, which will offer Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners the opportunity to work in the UK cultural museums holding their cultural belongings. This programme will allow for knowledge-sharing on documentation of and care for collections, in addition to beliefs, practices and traditions related to the cultural belongings in these collections.

The UK must seek to establish trust with Indigenous Australian communities as a first step to consolidating partnerships with these communities. Making way for the consultation of and collaboration between institutions and communities is necessary for returning sovereignty to Indigenous Australian communities, renewing their connections to cultural and spiritual traditions through their cultural belongings.

This two-way relationship is also essential for UK museums to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs, cultures and traditions related to Indigenous Australian cultural belongings. These proposals support the return of sovereignty, revival and healing of cultures around the world, and will redefine the UK as a nation that acknowledges responsibility for, holds remembrance of and reconciles with the cultures affected by its colonial activities, in addition to situating the UK at the centre of global

dialogues on identity, immigration and environment that equally yet diversely affect cultures worldwide.

Recommendation 1: The UK Government should amend deaccessioning laws for national museums

Non-national UK museums act autonomously on restitution requests submitted regarding the cultural belongings that they hold. National museums, however, are restricted by the British Museum Act 1963 and the National Heritage Act 1983, which prohibit deaccessioning unless an object is a duplicate, a printed object made later than 1850, or the object is unfit for retention. The new government has no plans to change this existing policy on restitution, as outlined by Sir Chris Bryant MP, Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism.⁴

The intention of the deaccessioning restrictions outlined in the British Museum Act 1963 was to protect works from short-term political decisions, such as repatriating works for diplomatic purposes. “The idea,” explains Barnaby Phillips in *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, “was of a public collection that was somehow above the concerns of the government of the day.”⁵ This idea, however, overlooks the inherently political nature of museum collections – such collections cannot exist ‘above’ political concerns. The practical implication of this legislation, therefore, binds not merely the government but the public, too, to an anti-restitution stance. This stance, while perhaps accepted in 1963, is broadly rejected today.

A 2021 YouGov poll asked ‘Should Britain return historical artefacts to their country of origin?’, with 62% of respondents in support including 29% that ‘strongly’ supported these returns.⁶ This general favourable opinion towards restitution contextualises a 2023 YouGov poll that asked ‘Would you support or oppose aboriginal artifacts [sic] being returned from British museums to Australia?’, to which only 14% of respondents indicated they would oppose the return of Aboriginal cultural belongings, while 68% would strongly support the restitution of such belongings.⁷

Support public for restitution and for reconsideration of laws prohibiting restitution is also upheld by Tristram Hunt, Director, V&A – one of the museums restricted by the National Heritage Act 1983. In July 2022, Tristram Hunt suggested that “it might be time for parliamentarians to think about how the act works in the current era,” implying that the cultural attitudes of the 1960s and 1980s that informed these laws are no longer upheld today.⁸

“I think political leadership in this space [restitution] could be amazing, actually, and could unlock so much potential in terms of relationship building.” – Interviewee one

The significant support for restitution amongst both the museum sector and the public demonstrates an imperative for the British Government to declare an unconditional, pro-restitution stance. This declaration is timely, considering the Scottish Government's formal commitment to a pro-restitution stance in 2024, following the repatriation of The House of Ni'isjool Memorial Pole from National Museums of Scotland in 2022. Similarly, National Museums NI restituted a collection of Hawaiian iwi kupuna (human remains) and mea kapu (sacred objects) in 2022. The British Government must empower national museums in England to enact public and sector opinion as its Northern Irish and Scottish peers have. This declaration can only be made sincere by revising the restrictions that prevent deaccessioning from national museums as outlined in the British Museum Act 1963 and the National Heritage Act 1983.

"Offering unconditional repatriation is on the table changes the nature of conversations [with Indigenous Australian communities]. Instantly, communities have reason to trust."
– Interviewee one

Enabling national museums to deaccession items will allow them to offer unconditional restitution to Indigenous Australian communities, which is a primary step in establishing trust with such communities and establishing long-term, mutually beneficial relationships.

The UK Government should declare a pro-restitution stance. It should then amend the British Museum Act 1963 and the National Heritage Act 1983 to reflect this stance. The Acts should not outline restrictions of deaccessioning, instead they should return power to deaccession belongings to the boards of national museums, which will consider deaccessioning requests on a case-by-case basis.

"Repatriation is not a loss for collecting institutions. It is an opportunity to build enduring partnerships, to walk beside communities and to share in the stories of First Nations people together." – Leonard Hill, Interim Chief Executive Officer, AIATSIS.

In the meantime, national museums should encourage discussion of restitution among their audiences and support relationships with the Traditional Custodians of the belongings that they house. Indeed, the V&A is building 'renewable cultural partnerships' with museums and other cultural institutions, which resulted in the long-term loan of the Head of Eros to the İstanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri in 2022. This initiative resulted in an agreement between the V&A and the British Museum and the Asantehene (King of Asante) Otumfuo Osei Tutu II in 2023, which resulted in the long-term loan of 32 gold and silver belongings, looted from the Asante people in the 19th century, to the Manhyia Palace Museum in 2024. While these loans demonstrate the existence of relationships between UK national museums and international museums in spite of deaccessioning restrictions, these loans should not be misconstrued as a substitute for unconditional restitution. Restitution refers not merely to the physical return of

belongings, but to the return of sovereignty, revival and healing among the Traditional Custodians of these belongings. Long-term loans and ‘renewable cultural partnerships’ alone are insufficient offerings to Indigenous communities, and risk undermining the sincere, pro-restitution intentions of the British museum sector and the British public.

“Working with artefacts [on loan] from the British Museum, communities [can be] slightly disappointed, because they know that they can’t come back [permanently or unconditionally].” – Interviewee two

All UK museums should ensure that their labelling reflects, where possible, the origin of cultural belongings and the circumstances in which they came to house them. If such information is incomplete, museums should transparently communicate the limitations of their records. Museums must prioritise a faithful, incomplete image of history rather than an unacknowledged, partial image in order to avoid inadvertently perpetuating programmes of censorship and propaganda that were so instrumental to instigating and maintaining British colonial power.

‘Which history we remember depends on what’s been made visible for you.’ – Hew Locke, Guyanese-British artist

Case Study

Hew Locke: what have we here? was an exhibition held at the British Museum from 17th October 2024 to 9th February 2025. The show was co-curated by Guayanese-British artist Hew Locke and the British Museum, with the assistance of Indra Khanna, and explored histories of British imperial power through the museum’s collection.

Throughout the exhibition were figures sculpted by Locke, creating a ‘Greek chorus commenting from the sidelines.’ Their presence in the show introduced a subjective narrative, through which Locke presented opinions and posed questions to the audience. Beneath a cast replica of a Queen Mother Idia mask, a sculptural portrait of the first Iyoba (Queen Mother) of the 16th century Benin Empire, Locke explains: ‘This cast was designed to lovingly replicate the original object. It might not be ‘real’, but maybe that’s okay. Could replicas replace restituted objects in museums?’. Similarly, as the audience left the exhibition, the final wall presented the question: ‘Do objects belong here, or in their place of origin? What is their place of origin? I have my opinions. Things change and shift and opinions differ. Everything is fluid.’ Locke adopted a conversational, diplomatic tone, addressing themes of restitution in an unpolarised, unintimidating manner and successfully inviting audiences of varying knowledge into a broader public conversation, inspiring personal contemplation.

The exhibition also promoted transparency in labelling of belongings. ‘Bells from southern Nigeria’, for example, are attributed to ‘Unrecorded Edo, Igala, Igbo and Yoruba

artists', from 'about 900s – 1900s'. The label presents ambiguity in that the objects' traditional makers are 'unrecorded' and the speculated period in which they were crafted spans a millennium, yet this partial information is successful in acknowledging and commemorating the communities to which they belong. This search for honesty, rather than concrete truth, is reiterated as the label explains that the objects were 'collected by colonial administrators, officers and others working in southern Nigeria, later donated or sold to the Museum, often by their descendants; some may originally have been looted from Benin City by British troops in 1897'. The label provides no opinion on these circumstances, yet transparently communicating the circumstances in which these objects reached the British Museum is essential to presenting the complex role of UK museums in the British colonial project, in addition to equipping audiences with the information necessary to reach their own informed opinions about the topics raised.

Recommendation 2: UK museums should evolve the museum paradigm

UK museums operate within structures informed by colonialism, framing cultural belongings in terms of ownership. This attitude subjugates the cultural belonging to the collector who gathered it or to the collecting institution in which it resides. Custodians from Indigenous Australian communities, however, consider these cultural belongings as beings unto themselves.

'Physical objects, in particular secret, sacred and ceremonial items, embody the spirit of their ancestors and are living beings rather than lifeless antiquities.' – AIATSIS, *Return of Cultural Heritage Report 2018-20*

The UK Government should support museums as they reconsider their paradigms, developing frameworks and processes that interact with cultural belongings not according to the attitudes of the land on which they are currently held, rather according to the attitudes of their Traditional Custodians.

Code of Ethics

All UK museums that manage and research collections including cultural belongings from Indigenous Australian communities should uphold a code of ethics that embodies up-to-date standards and developments in ethics and support for human rights. UK museums should establish their own ethical codes with guidance from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and AIATSIS' Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research.

UK museums should develop and make publicly accessible an ethical code that acknowledges the right to Indigenous self-determination; support the engagement and collaboration of Indigenous Australian communities in the management and research of their cultural belongings; ensure the cultural capability and learning of its staff engaging with these belongings; and seek free, informed and prior consent from Indigenous Australian communities regarding the cultural belongings they hold.

Access to stores

The majority of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings are held in the stores of UK museums. This position, out-of-sight, is often because little is known about the belonging or there is a lack of museum exhibition space, which further emphasises the sheer scale of these collections. Belongings may also be out-of-sight because they are secret, sacred

and ceremonial, which means that they can only be seen and interacted with by individuals of a certain age, gender and knowledge.

'Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies.' – UNDRIP, Article 12, Section 1

'States shall seek to enable the access of ceremonial objects in conjunction with Indigenous peoples concerned.' – UNDRIP, Article 12, Section 2

In accordance with UNDRIP Article 12, Indigenous Australian communities should be able to access the cultural belongings necessary to practise and teach their ceremonies, even if these belongings are held in stores that are closed to the public.

UK museums should be willing to invite individuals from Indigenous Australian communities to access cultural belongings held in their stores. UK museums should consult Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Custodians to gain guidance on whether belongings are secret, sacred and ceremonial and therefore restricted. If a belonging is unidentified, it should be boxed so that it is not directly visible to visitors, in order to prevent individuals inappropriately witnessing a restricted item. Such an item should be accompanied by a detailed description to allow visitors to make an informed decision on what they would like to see or not to see.

No belonging should be visible to the public, either in an exhibition or in stores, before such belonging is identified and its Traditional Custodians have been consulted. In order to acknowledge unidentified belongings, UK museums should detail the extent of their collection of unidentified cultural belongings on labelling visible to museum visitors, alongside access to information on the work they are doing, if any, to provenance such belongings.

Facilitating access will not only allow Indigenous Australian communities, but witnessing these interactions between Traditional Custodians and their cultural belongings can have significant educational impact for museums' staff and, by extension, the public.

"If you've sat outside a store and heard traditional owners singing to and crying with this material, you understand collections differently. There is this sense of connectedness and embodied relationships that we find, intellectually, really hard to understand. You need to see it, hear it and to have those people tell you what that means." – Interviewee one

The Powerhouse Parramatta, the Louvre Lens and the V&A East Storehouse – opening later this year – are examples of museums around the world providing visitors access to their back-of-house stores. Tristram Hunt, Director, V&A, perceives this access as

promising ‘transparency around the origins and ownership of objects – not least because many of these items have a highly charged past.’ ‘This is not,’ he writes, “decolonisation”, but a strong institutional determination to surface, interpret and disseminate difficult histories.’⁹ This transparency is an essential step in acknowledging responsibility for and reconciling with cultures affected by Britain’s colonial activities.

Documentation and care of collections

UK museums uphold conditions of care that prioritise the physical conservation of a cultural belonging, such as seldom touching objects and, if so, with gloves; holding belongings in climate-controlled storage and displaying belongings in glass cases. This Eurocentric prioritisation of physical conservation contrasts with Indigenous perspectives that actively use cultural belongings in the process of actively practicing and teaching – and therefore conserving – spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies.

Institutions should update their conditions of care for collections to accommodate those stipulated by the Traditional Custodians of the cultural belongings they possess. These conditions may include touching, using and playing with belongings. Understandings of and decisions regarding conservation must value conservation of culture and use equally to conserving a belonging’s physical state.

The European written tradition that informs archival practice and provenance research means UK museums are dependent upon written records and accounts to trace the history, meaning and purpose of a belonging. Such a tradition is inconsistent with that of the Indigenous Australian Custodians of these belongings, who share information orally, through story and song.

UK museums should embrace a flexible approach to documentation and care of collections that include Indigenous Australian attitudes towards and knowledge regarding cultural belongings. Institutions should acknowledge that existing written documentation may not offer an authoritative or comprehensive history of a belonging, and they should be willing to modify or supplement this history with knowledge passed and shared via oral traditions.

Case study

At a handover ceremony held on 5th September 2023, Manchester Museum returned 174 cultural belongings to the Anindilyakwa community of Groote Eylandt. Among the belongings returned was a collection of Dadikwakwa-kwa, or shell dolls, that are painted by parents for their daughters using ochre designs and are intended to strengthen cross-generational bonds within the community.

During the ceremony, the Anindilyakwa community gifted Manchester Museum a set of Dadikwakwa-kwa, with the condition of care that, once a year, the Dadikwakwa-kwa must be taken off display to be played with by the local Manchester community. This condition reflects, as Esme Ward, Director, Manchester Museum, explains, that “what we’ve been gifted by the Anindilyakwa community is living culture. It is such a different way of thinking through what care and conservation look like.” The first play session will take place in April 2025.

Recommendation 3: UK museums should establish a consortium for collections of Indigenous Australian belongings

In 2019, the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts was established, followed by the formation of the Dutch Colonial Collections Consortium in 2022. While created independently, both organisations intend to acknowledge the historical responsibility resulting from colonialism and colonial attitudes. They share similar objectives to support collections managers nationally in provenance research of collections from colonial contexts; to serve as a central point of contact for countries and communities of origin; and to support the implementation of restitution policies through knowledge sharing. The German Contact Point upholds an additional objective to facilitate connections between individuals and institutions with the intention of such networks promoting reconciliation between Germany and communities impacted by its colonial attitudes and actions.

In 2024, the Australian Government announced ongoing funding for AIATSIS' Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) programme – six years following the start of its pilot in 2018. The scheme returns Indigenous Australian cultural belongings to Australia and facilitates partnerships between Indigenous Australian communities and collecting institutions internationally.

"If there were dedicated funds to support this sort of work in various manners in the UK, it would be beneficial for museums. It could be drawn upon for different things: provenance research, working with a community, or working with researchers. All in the aim of collaboration between institutions and communities, and returning collection."

– Interviewee three

The existence of an Australian counterpart presents an opportune context for a UK consortium for collections of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings. The consortium would bring together UK museums housing Indigenous Australian cultural belongings and seek to facilitate reconciliation with and the return of sovereignty to Indigenous Australian communities through provenance research, digitisation and the restitution of their cultural belongings. It would also support community work between UK museums and Indigenous Australian communities, as well as providing leadership in knowledge-sharing, education and sharing best practice between UK museums housing collections of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings.

The consortium would be led by a small group of researchers operating out of one of the partaking UK museums, working in tandem with AIATSIS' RoCH programme to provenance, digitise and reconstitute Indigenous Australian cultural belongings to their Traditional Custodians.

The consortium should be partially funded by the partaking museums and should receive support from AHRC for its digitisation and provenancing initiatives.

Digitisation of collections

The consortium should develop a digital archive of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings held in museums nationally. The archive can draw upon research undertaken by RoCH, which is developing a platform to effectively manage, store and visualise collections surveyed by AIATSIS. A centralised digitisation system will establish a standard for the formatting and detailing of collection records nationally, exposing gaps in knowledge that can inform the direction of future provenance research. A national digital archive will allow for comparison between UK institutions, facilitating information sharing and identification of cultural belongings for which there are limited collection records.

The digital archive should be publicly accessible, allowing Indigenous Australian communities to view, identify and learn about cultural belongings. Visual and written records are an essential element of establishing and maintaining connections between the cultural belongings in collections and Indigenous Australian communities. This archive will also present the possibility for Indigenous Australian communities to document cultural traditions, beliefs and practices associated with cultural objects, enriching UK institutions' understandings of the collections they hold.

The database should be managed in accordance with the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty, and records that contain sensitive or culturally restricted information should be duplicated, with a public record warning that the record contains sensitive information and a second, full record held in a linked closed repository.

A fund for the co-curation of collections with Indigenous Australian communities

The contact point should have an associated fund that individuals and organisations can apply to in order to conduct projects and programmes related to collections of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings. The objective of the fund will be to support the involvement of communities in the co-curation of collections, establishing channels of knowledge and cultural exchange to create

long-lasting, institutional change to the approach of UK institutions to managing such collections.

Funding will derive in part from the partaking museums and be supplemented by grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. A percentage of this grant should be reserved for travel for both curators of UK museums to Country and Indigenous Australian communities to UK museums. This distribution of funds acknowledges the importance of facilitating community engagement in decision making regarding Indigenous Australian collections, which is a key aspect of returning sovereignty to Indigenous Australian communities. Where possible, projects and programmes should conduct community consultation on Country, in order to engage with all key Custodians within a community and the community more broadly.

Applicants and funders should consider that projects and programmes should be centred around two-way learning about collections of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings, with funders considering longer-term projects in order to support the development of long-enduring partnerships between communities and UK museums.

Contact point for restitution requests

Communities that believe one or some of their cultural belongings are being held in a UK museum should be able to direct enquiries to the contact point. The contact point should draw upon its centralised digital archive to provide information; advise communities on submitting restitution requests and the criteria outlined by individual institutions; and facilitate connections between communities and institutions. While the contact point will advise individuals, it will only engage in restitutions requests by a recognised authority (e.g. land councils).

A centralised contact point would address the lack of UK support available to Indigenous Australian communities throughout the process of requesting restitution. The current de-centralised process means that the research and request submission process is often overwhelming for communities, which must alter restitution applications in order to meet the unique criteria of different UK museums.

'Requests independently made by communities are more often denied completely or left to lapse, as the research and decision making process of the overseas collecting institution is too long and difficult. When this happens, communities are left feeling disenfranchised and disempowered.' – AIATSIS, *Return of Cultural Heritage Report 2018-20*

A centralised contact point that would work directly with AIATSIS would provide UK-based expertise on national collections, realising the country's pro-restitution stance

through proactive information-sharing and advice-giving and working to mitigate the current feelings of disenfranchisement and disempowerment among the Indigenous Australian communities that submit restitution requests. This contact point will provide the resources necessary to enable UK institutions to act on their support for community engagement and for restitution.

Working group for museums managing collections from colonial contexts

The consortium should host a working group comprising individuals from UK museums managing collections of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings, Senior Indigenous Australian Custodians and a representative sample of UK museum visitors. This working group will operate as an educational forum, encouraging knowledge sharing and guidance on best practice for managing collections of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings and developing partnerships with Indigenous Australian communities.

“Conversations are the work.” – Interviewee four

Consistent discussion between institutions enforces mutual accountability, encouraging ongoing development of internal processes and external community engagement. The indefinite existence of this working group will ensure that revised practices will be embedded into institutions, securing their longevity and impact.

The intention of the working group is to encourage institutional change nationwide and this change will be realised through the development of confidence, skills, training and leadership of individuals working on and managing collections of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings.

Recommendation 4: UK museums should establish a national fellowship programme for Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners

For UK museums to faithfully represent the histories, spirituality, cultures and traditions of Indigenous communities, the staffing bodies of such institutions should include people of Indigenous perspectives.

In 2021, Manchester Museum appointed Alexandra P. Alberda to the position of Curator of Indigenous Perspectives, intending to encourage a curatorial culture conscious of the legacies of empire and colonialism, working with Indigenous people to affect reconciliation. Similarly, in 2023, Tate appointed Kimberley Moulton to the position of Adjunct Curator, First Nations and Indigenous Art, with the intention of empowering Indigenous communities through art and cultural connections. Such roles and the people that occupy them powerfully integrate Indigenous perspectives and into these museums' practices, yet these roles remain uncommon in the broader landscape of museums nationally.

These are permanent, full time positions, which have been determined by the individual institutions' decision to invest in indigenising initiatives. While such decisions are commendable, other museums may be unable to create similar positions due to financial and resourcing limitations. A response which acknowledges these limitations is a short-term fellowship programme will offer Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners professional experience at UK museums, without placing significant financial expectation in individual museums.

A national fellowship programme should be informed by the Encounters Fellowships, established by the National Museum Australia in 2016. The development programme offers six Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners professional experience at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, as well as at partner cultural institutions in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. It is funded by benefactors, as well as donations from individuals.

UK museums should establish a fellowship programme that would provide the museums themselves and individuals from Indigenous Australian communities with the necessary network and support to introduce Indigenous perspectives to UK museum practices. The primary objective of the programme is for Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners to share their insight, perspectives and practices with UK museums. Working in museums with collections of Indigenous Australian cultural

belongings will allow fellows to assist in identifying and information-sharing about such belongings, assisting their documentation and provenance. During the programme, fellows will work alongside cultural sector specialists, gaining insight into collections research and care, curatorial, exhibition planning, digital storytelling and educational programming that will support their professional development in the cultural sector.

This programme will help consolidate relationships between museums and Indigenous Australian communities, encouraging mutual understanding and respect. Such an initiative is imperative to facilitating cultural revival, healing, and justice between the people of UK museums and Indigenous Australian communities, redefining the relationship between British and Indigenous Australian peoples as a partnership valuing equality.

The fellowship programme should be partially funded by partaking museums, and supported by grants provided by Arts Council England. It should be overseen by Museums Association, owing to its interest in and insight into professionally development individuals in the museum sector through its Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA) programme, and AIATSIS should provide support by raising awareness of the programme to Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners, through its engagement with Australian museums and Indigenous Australian communities on Country.

Conclusion

The fresh political landscape of 2025 presents the UK with a unique opportunity to redefine its identity, harnessing reconciliation with its colonial past to become a global cultural leader and a destination for global dialogue between new political leaders. For the UK to make use of this opportunity, our government must acknowledge its influential role in realising the will of the public and of the culture sector to reconcile the UK with Indigenous Australian communities. It must then direct this influence to:

Amend deaccessioning laws for national museums, returning power to deaccession cultural belongings from UK national museums to the boards of these museums. This process should be achieved by:

- Declaring a pro-restitution stance
- Amending the British Museum Act 1963 and the National Heritage Act 1983, returning power to deaccession belongings to the board of national museums

Encourage UK museums to evolve the museum paradigm, understanding museums not as owners of cultural belongings but as spaces housing living culture. This attitude should be reflected in:

- Museum codes of ethics that respect the rights of Indigenous peoples
- Access for Indigenous peoples to museum stores to identify and engage with cultural belongings
- Flexible documentation and care of collections

Support UK museums to establish a consortium for collections of Indigenous Australian belongings that will lead national research, engagement to restitution requests and guidance on best practice for UK collections from colonial contexts. This organisation will:

- Digitise collections and manage a publicly accessible digital archive
- Fund the co-curation of collections with Indigenous Australian communities
- Guide Indigenous communities on the process of making a restitution request, supporting both communities and UK museums through restitutions
- Organise a working group for museums managing collections from colonial contexts that will gather expertise from Indigenous communities, the culture sector and the public

Endorse UK museums to establish a national fellowship programme for Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners to recognise and increase the representation of diverse perspectives to UK and international visitors. This process will require:

- UK museums to commit to partaking in a national fellowship scheme

- Supporting fellowships in UK museums for Indigenous Australian cultural practitioners

These recommendations are imperative to establishing the UK as a leading example of a nation reconciling with its colonial past and the communities impacted by its colonial activities. Such reconciliation is the first step in building long-lasting partnerships between the UK and Indigenous communities, enriching its understanding of diverse ways of believing, acting and living. This understanding will enhance both the UK's cultural offering and its expertise on topics such as identity, immigration and environment. With this expertise, the UK will become an authoritative voice in international political dialogue as well as the epicentre for this political dialogue.

Methodology

This report was created in response to AIATSIS's Return of Cultural Heritage project, which sought to facilitate the return of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings to Country and identified the UK as the holder of the largest overseas collection of Indigenous Australian cultural belongings. The intention of this report was to investigate the response of the UK museums to AIATSIS's findings. In simplified terms, the investigation was led by two questions: "Do you want to engage with Indigenous Australian communities?" and "What is preventing you from doing so?". This research was gathered, in its majority, from in-depth interviews with experts from the cultural sector, including directors of museums and the museum sector body, senior curators and PhD researchers. Due to the positions of these interviewees, and their proximity to government and to funders, I have anonymised the quotes taken from these conversations in order to accurately represent sector opinion while protecting the professional relationships of the individuals interviewed.

Endnotes

1. Walpole, The State of London Luxury 2024, October 2024
2. Wikipedia, List of most-visited museums, accessed 13 January 2025
3. AIATSIS, Return of Cultural Heritage Report 2018-20, 2020
4. Letter from Sir Chris Bryant MP to Cat Smith MP, 20 December 2024
5. Barnaby Phillips, Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes, 2021
6. YouGov, 2 July 2021
7. YouGov, 6 June 2023
8. Tristram Hunt, Radio 4 Today Programme, July 2022
9. The Economist, Tristram Hunt, Tristram Hunt explains why museums are turning themselves inside out, 19 November 2024

