

# Europe's Forgotten History: From "Human Zoos" to "Human Trophies" Displayed in Colonial Museums

By [Garikai Chengu](#)

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*Global outrage was sparked when the Zimbabwean lion, Cecil was killed as a trophy; but to this day, Britain and America continue to display in museums human remains that are human trophies of their massacres and subjugation of indigenous populations.*

Britain has recently revealed that it is currently negotiating with Zimbabwe over the repatriation of human remains, belonging to fighters from Zimbabwe's struggle against British colonisers, currently displayed in the Natural History Museum of London.

On Tuesday, Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe, said in a speech that the Zimbabwean liberation war fighters, "whose heads were decapitated by the colonial occupying force, were then dispatched to England, to signify British victory over, and subjugation of, the local population."

That Thursday night, the British Foreign Office confirmed that "remains of Zimbabwean origin" were on display in a museum in London.

President Mugabe also remarked that, "surely, keeping decapitated heads as war trophies, in this day and age, in a national history museum, must rank among the highest forms of racist moral decadence, sadism and human insensitivity."

Prior to European and American colonialism, the first museums were founded in Africa and played an essential role in many African civilisations. In fact, museums have been a part of human history for more than 2,000 years.

The tradition of collecting and displaying intriguing items began in Black Ancient Egypt. Most rising Western cultures from the Roman Empire onwards then displayed exotic animals and flora in their museums. The word "museum" comes from the Greek *mouseion*, meaning "temple built for the muses and museums", which were originally designed to promote art, science and ingenuity. After the European Dark Ages, the next step in the evolution of museums occurred as a result of the ingenuity of the Black African Moors who conquered and civilized parts of Europe. The study of the natural world was once again encouraged by the Black Moors establishing "curiosity cabinets" across Europe after a millennium of Western ignorance.

Prior to the 19th century, museums tended to be small and private, open only to the aristocracy of a given nation. During the 19th century, the modern museum as we know it began to take shape. With plunder streaming in from all corners of the British Empire, the modern museum was born.

The British Museum was created largely as a repository for artifacts looted from Africa

between the 17th and 19th centuries. Such plunder includes many artifacts from Ancient Egypt which prove that the Ancient Egyptians, who established the first museum, were themselves dark-skinned Afroancestrals.

Across the world, one of the consequences of British colonialism was the violent appropriation of cultural artifacts, sacred and precious objects; and one of the legacies is their ongoing display in British museums. For centuries, the museums of Great Britain have served to bolster national white pride and glorify British imperial culture, by displaying a wide array of artifacts looted and plundered during European slavery and colonialism.

One example of the rather grim history of colonial racial terrorism is the long European history of human zoos, which featured Africans and conquered indigenous peoples, displayed in the same way as animals. Men, women and children would be kidnapped, locked up in cages and exhibited in front of European large audiences. Many people died after short stints in captivity and they lived in tortuous conditions. Visitors to the human zoos would often poke the African children with sticks, throw food at them and audiences were permitted to subject the captives to various degrading acts for a fee.

The primitive practice of putting indigenous people on display began during the modern period when explorers like Columbus and Vespucci lured natives back to Europe to be flaunted and paraded like trophies.

In the late 1800's, Europe had been filled with human zoos in cities like Paris, Hamburg, Antwerp, Barcelona, Warsaw, Milan, and London. Thirty-four million people visited the 1931 World Fair for human zoos in Paris. New York was not morally exempt from such racist and degrading practices. New York City saw these popular exhibits continue into the *twentieth* century, even after the ends of both World Wars. Millions of Americans attended these spectacles.

Prior to the Second World War, human Zoos in America were at their height and *the New York Times* reported at the time, "few expressed audible objection to the sight of a human being in a cage. The crowd loved it...It is absurd to make moan over the imagined humiliation and degradation that they suffer." At a time when America and Britain accepted human zoos as perfectly normal, Adolf Hitler was the one to ban them.

By creating the first mass contact between Whites and Blacks, and by promoting the *spectacularization* of "The Other", human zoos were a key factor in the progressive shift in the West from scientific to popular racism.

The primitive European and American practice of exhibiting Africans in zoos continued well into the 1950s. During the 1960s, the baton of state-sanctioned racism towards Africans was passed from Europe's human zoos into its museums. In fact, historically, museums in Britain have held some of the most reprehensible images of Blacks as barbarians and savages, and the most degrading images of Black women.

A 20 year-old South African woman known as Sarah Baartman would be emblematic of the dark era that gave rise to the popularity of human zoos. She was taken by an exotic animal-dealer to London in 1810. Sarah had a genetic characteristic known as steatopygia; large buttocks and elongated labia. Thousands of British men, women and children would come to human zoos to gawk at her naked body. Sarah's days were punctuated by rape and scientific examinations. In 1815, Sarah died in abject poverty and her skeleton, sexual

organs and brain were put on display at the Museum of Mankind in Paris where they remained for almost a century until 1974. In 2002, President Nelson Mandela formally requested the repatriation of her remains.

If you add up the attendance for every English Premier league football, rugby, basketball and cricket game in Britain this year, the combined total will come to about 30 million people. That's a big number, but 49 million people will visit British museums this year. Museums are important sites for contestation over grand narratives of history, especially nationalist and imperial history. For more people to see the British state openly flaunting stolen loot in a museum this year than those who will watch sport, shows that cultural imperialism and true primitive racial attitudes are deeply entrenched in British statehood.

During the "Great Scramble" for control over the continent in the late 19th century, art counted among the highest prizes of imperialist plunder. Britain still unashamedly displays thousands of stolen African artifacts worth hundreds of billions pounds in the British Museum, Liverpool Museum and elsewhere. Many other invaluable stolen artifacts from Africa, Asia and South America are in private British hands. Notably the Benin bronzes, ivories and other ancient works looted by British colonialists, especially during the reprisal attacks launched by the Queen's soldiers against natives trying to resist imperialism in 1897.

The British Museum has long presented an array of African objects throughout its rooms, and its new African Galleries are second to none. Its ancient Egyptian collection is stunning. And they should be: while African collections in Germany, France and Belgium hold several important pieces, no other nation could match the British when it came to plundering so many art objects of a conquered people over so long a time period.

The British Museum, controls a quarter of a million artifacts from Africa alone, and maintains that looting those artifacts "was legal at the time." As ever when the West perpetrates a crime against other people, they have a perversely fantastic way of asserting that their actions are completely *bona fide*, entitled and legal. Arthur Torrington OBE of the British Museums and Libraries Archives Council candidly admits that museums do not "want to accept the objects were stolen because if *they do it for one, they'll have to do it for all.*"

The modern British museum may literally have been built on the backs of oppressed indigenous populations and its rooms filled with plundered goods from Europe's colonial conquests; but in this day and age, the ongoing display of stolen loot and human trophies is unjustifiable in a modern, civilized society.

*Garikai Chengu is a scholar at Harvard University. Contact him on [garikai.chengu@gmail.com](mailto:garikai.chengu@gmail.com)*

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