

Introduction

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) in New York is the world's largest art museum and is home to over 2 million objects from around the world. Each object has entered into the Met through its own unique journey.

Onus, exists to bring to the forefront five different ways objects have appeared in The Met's art collection. It aims to spark conversation on the practice and morality of acquisition and claims of ownership, provoking discourse around how we display objects and the role/accountability museums play.

Stolen The Rape Of Tamar

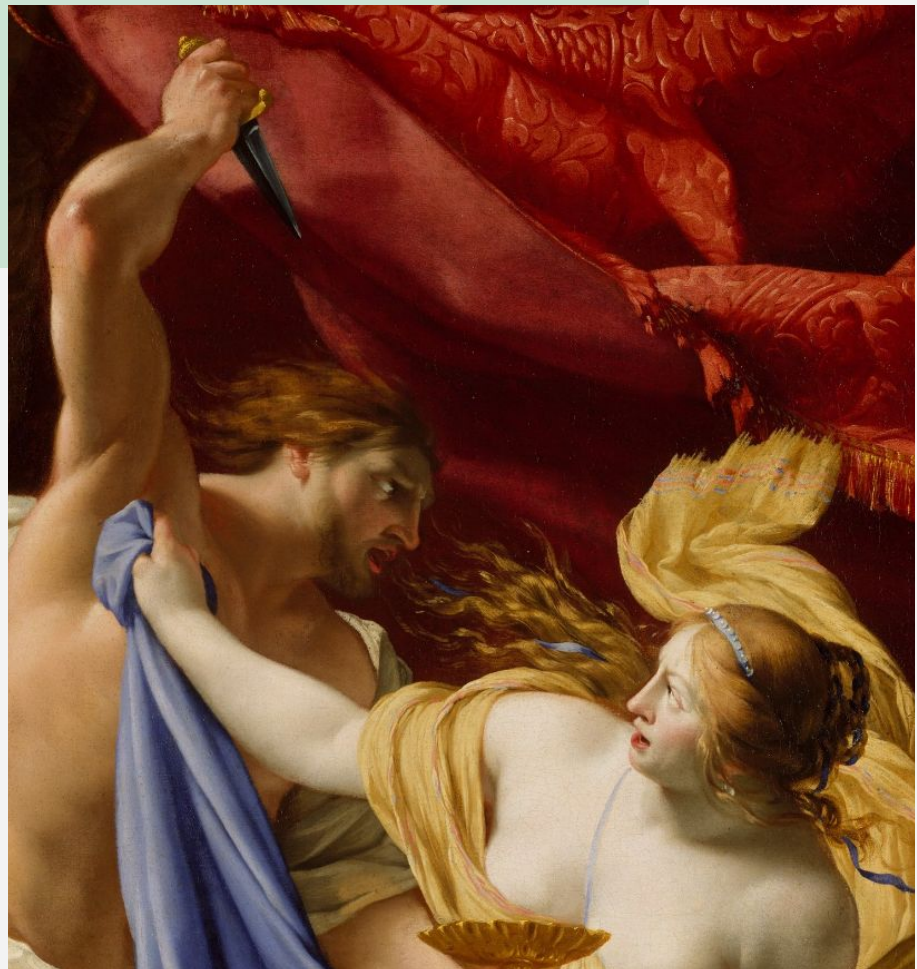


This oil on canvas by French artist Eustache Le Sueur portrays a snapshot of a brutal scene of the biblical figures Tamar and Amnon.

Siegfried Aram, a Jewish arts dealer and the original owner of the painting, escaped Germany in 1934 under Nazi occupation.

Due to the circumstances, Aram was forced to sell his villa to Oskar Sommer and in the process Sommer took his art collection as well as his home, leaving Aram with nothing when he fled the country. Aram had attempted to retrieve his stolen artwork but was unsuccessful.

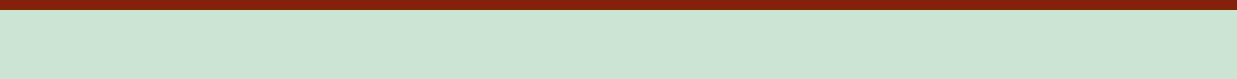
The Met adjusted the provenance of the painting when the knowledge surfaced, however the painting remains available to view in Gallery 621.



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This painting underwent a change of ownership in a time when a lot of wealth and assets were being seized under the violent persecution of the Jewish people in Europe. This painting makes us question whether it is in the museum's best interest to keep hold of this painting, with the knowledge of its provenance and the technology to mend this injustice?

*In whose best interest is it to
house stolen objects, objects
from lost tribes and the
descendants of enslaved
people?*



Archeological finds (Human Remains)

Mummy of Nesiamun

The mummy of Nesiamun was acquired by the Met in the 1920s during the American-led 'Egyptian Expedition' in Deir el Bahri. Unfortunately, there is little information available to us on who Nesiamun was, their role in their society and how they died.



The mummy of Nesiamun was allotted to the museum by the Egyptian Government in the 'division of finds' in 1926.

From the 16th through the mid-20th centuries, when Egypt was dominated by foreign powers, countless pieces of its past were sent to cultural centres abroad by means of gift, trade, and coercion.



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It is widely recognised that these human remains were obtained under colonial administration as a result of uneven divisions of power.

The debate remains more prevalent today than ever before as museums tackle issues such as decolonisation, reparations and rights to 'claims'.

Is it ethical to 'own' human remains?

Who 'owns' them?

And is it right to transport them and display them beyond their resting place?

Many of these questions remain unanswered.

Today, the contentious acquisition of their ancient treasures is impossible to ignore as Egypt demands reparations for their looted artifacts.

Bought Plate with Carp



This porcelain plate was made in Jingdezhen, China in the Yuan Dynasty during the 12th century. As early as the Yuan Dynasty, this type of porcelain was sold all over the ancient world as a commodity and favoured household object.

In the mid-14th century, the carp plate was sold abroad and purchased by Mrs. Richard E. Linburn. In 1987, a prolific Chinese antique dealer, J. J. Lally & Co. sold it to the MET museum. This plate was a practical household object in ancient times and was traded as a commodity. Today, it has become a historical relic and is displayed in a museum.

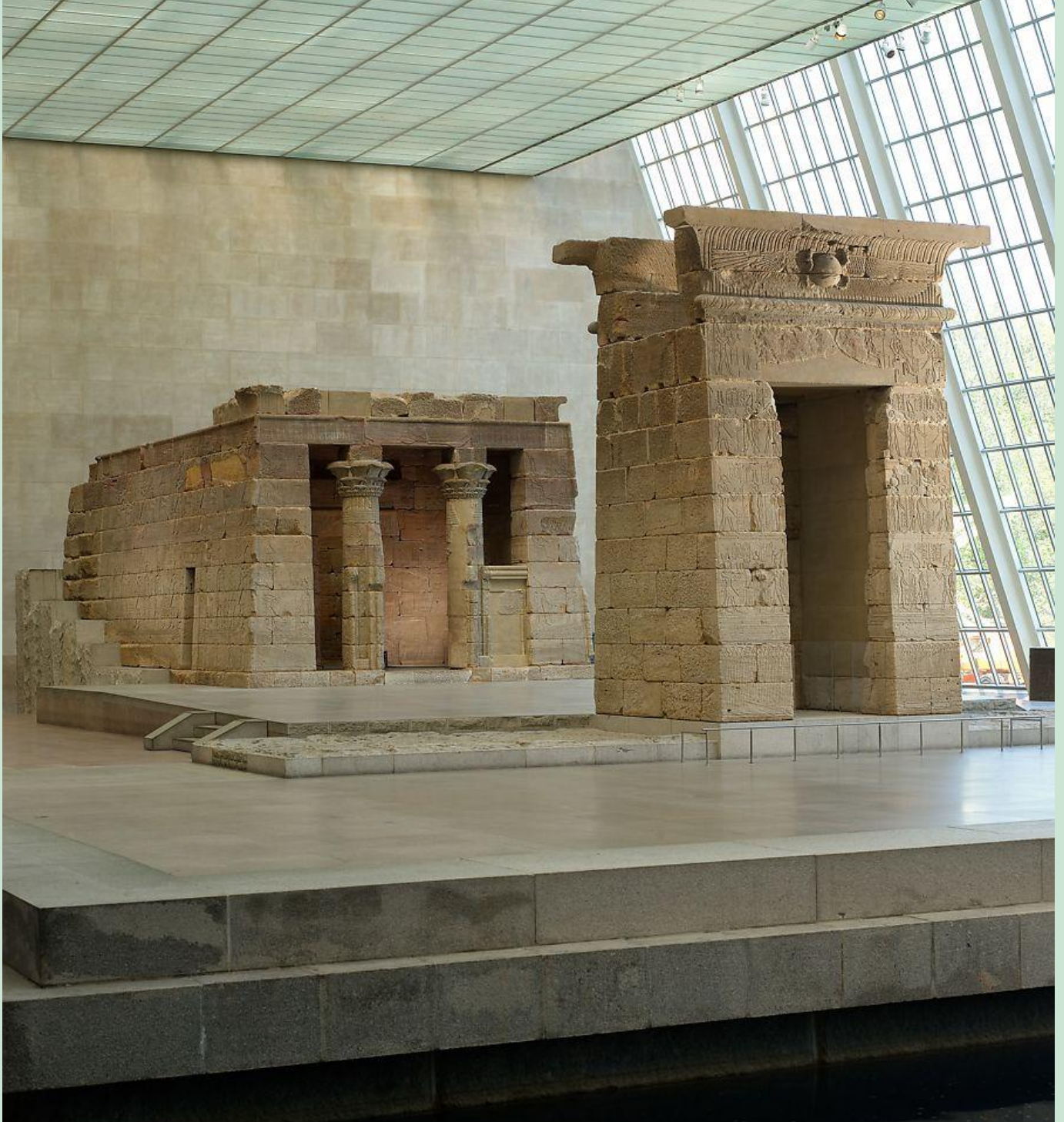
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This plate became an antique, circulating amongst Western art dealers before eventually finding itself sold to the Met through yet another Chinese art dealer. It could be said that the descendants of those who made it have been robbed of agency and control over this object.

Is this plate still a commodity or is it a key part of ancient Chinese culture and tradition? Is this a symbol of ancient trade that The Met museum could use to demonstrate to the world the complexity of 14th century Chinese trade.



Gifted The Temple of Dendur



The Temple of Dendur, built in Egypt under the rule of Caesar Augustus - the first emperor of Rome.



The construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s pushed the Egyptian government to organise the preservation of the temple located on the flood basin of the dam. UNESCO orchestrated a worldwide campaign, leading to the relocation of 22 temples including the Temple of Dendur, which was subsequently gifted to the Met.

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In the past ten years, the Egyptian government has expressed interest in the return of their antiquities despite previously consenting to gifting them away to the museum during the 60's.

The ethics around gifted items to museums are sometimes contested and complex. Rather than a loan, a gifted object is much more permanent, once the gift is accepted it is owned by the receiver. It is a permanent exchange. However, debate still remains over who has the claim to the object. Is the temple the property of Egypt – where the temple was built with Egyptian materials and workers? Or does the US have the claim of ownership, as it was gifted – and then awarded – to the MET museum.

This makes the temple's provenance complex and unclear. What is clear however, is that it is an important historical artifact which encapsulates the complications of gifted ownership.

*If we were to question
ownership practice, what
would be next?*



Looted under a violent colonial administration
Seated Male Figure



These figurative sculptures straddle the threshold between life and death, displayed in shrines to remember important individuals.

Many of the objects present in the Met collection have been acquired under mysterious and undocumented ways. The specific details of this object's provenance that are available to us are all from within the last 50 years. However, what is available to us is the imperial relationship between the region that is now Congo and the source country, from which we first knew about this object, Belgium. From this, we can gather general details of its acquisition as it, along with many other objects, were most likely looted by missionaries and anthropologists from 1880's onwards under Belgium's violent colonial occupation of the Congo region.

Mariette Henau, a Belgian collector of African antiquities is the only documented owner of this object before it was sold to The Met.



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Although the acquisition of this object is undocumented, there is clear and open political discourse around the circulation of colonial era objects, especially from regions where colonial tactics were particularly severe. We could argue that The Met should be doing more to find the origins of this object and perhaps even go as far as to restore it to the people it was stolen from.

Curators Take

Our take from this exhibition is not to tear down the efforts of the museum to educate the public, but to criticise the way in which the museum claims agency over objects present. The world is changing and we must change with it, we must tear down old practices birthed from the colonial era and reimagine new ones as architects of the future.

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