

Returning Cultural Artefacts

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are advised that this text may contain the names and images of people who have died.

Returning Cultural Artefacts

Artefacts and Museums

Museums are interesting places to visit. They have collections of unusual and valuable **artefacts** on display. The artefacts come from different places and cultures around the world. But behind some of the collections is a difficult issue which some museums keep quiet about or **downplay**. It concerns how some of the artefacts came to be in the museums' collections, and whether they should still be held there.



Tourists look at the Rosetta Stone, an ancient Egyptian artefact, in the British Museum.

Many of the artefacts were taken from their homelands during the **colonial era**. This was a period beginning about 500 years ago, when people from Britain and other countries in Europe began to travel more widely. They went on ships to other parts of the world, where they saw ancient artworks and met **First Nations peoples** from many cultures. The Europeans were looking for new items to trade and new lands that Europeans had never visited before. Sometimes, they set up colonies in these lands.

The Europeans saw that life was very different in other parts of the world. They became fascinated with the **cultural** artefacts of these places, such as everyday tools and **ceremonial** items. They also realised that many of the artefacts were valuable works of art. Sometimes, people took artefacts back to Europe for study, or to put them on show to the public there. Other times, they simply wanted them for themselves.

This tiger head is an Indian artefact held in the Clive collection at Powis Castle, Wales.



All sorts of people, including **diplomats**, explorers, traders and soldiers, took artefacts from local people. Sometimes, they traded them for other items or paid small amounts of money for the artefacts. Often, they just stole them.

In the colonial era, European people did not always think about whether it was right or wrong to take artefacts from their original owners.

Sometimes, the Europeans believed they were protecting valuable items by removing them. Over time, many of these artefacts were sold to some of the largest, most famous museums in the world. Most of these artefacts have remained in the museums ever since.



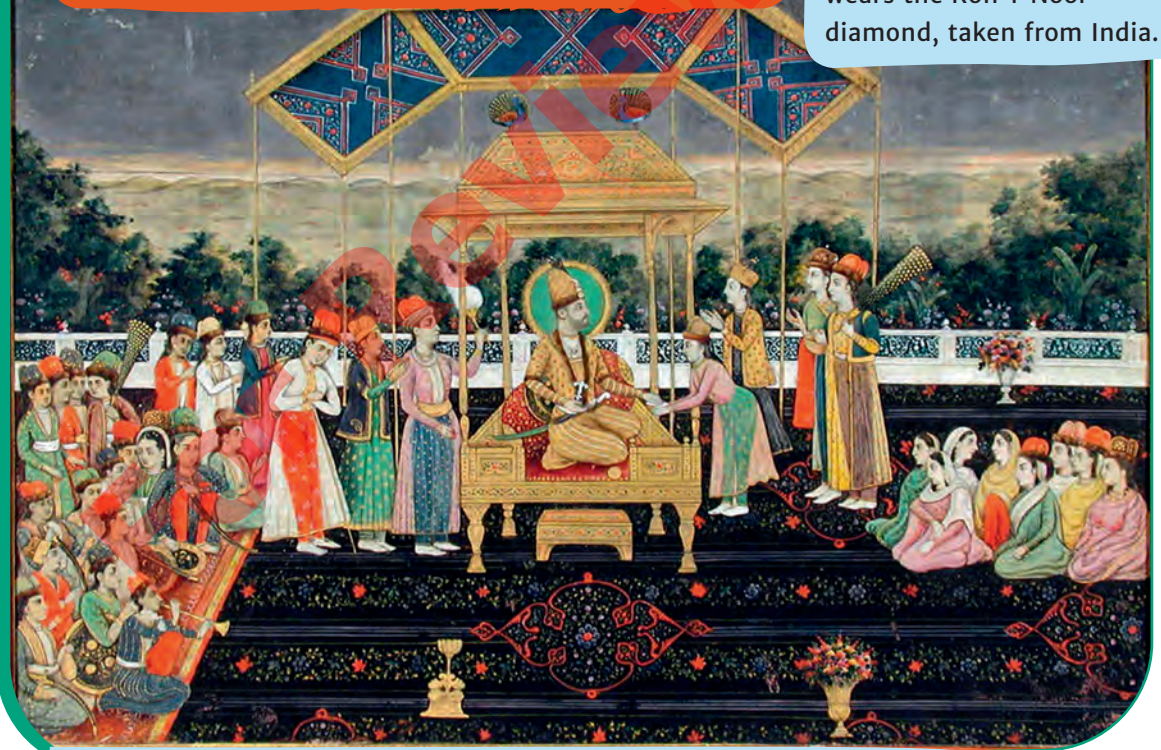
Visitors look at First Nations artefacts in the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada.

Many descendants of the original owners of these items have called for the artefacts to be returned to their homelands, often without success. Today, many people have questioned why large foreign museums and private owners still hold the **heritage** of other people in their collections.

The English word **loot** comes from the Hindi word “lut”, meaning to steal or plunder. The word became popular in English when Britain controlled India as a colonial power.



Queen Victoria of England wears the Koh-i-Noor diamond, taken from India.



This watercolour artwork from 1850 shows the Peacock Throne, where the Koh-i-Noor diamond once sat as a symbol of Indian rulers.

Returning Artefacts

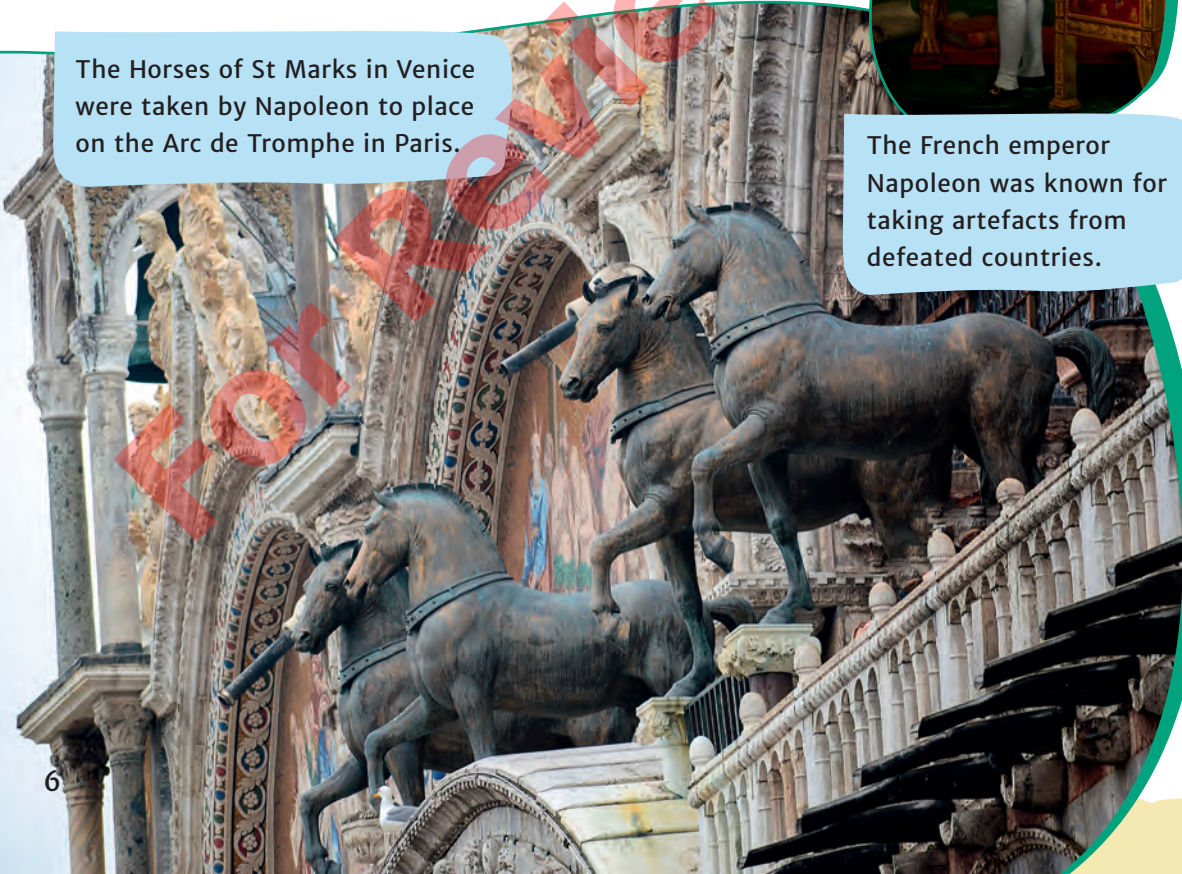
Returning artefacts to their original owners is not a new idea. More than 2000 years ago, the ancient Greeks wrote about the need for invaders to respect Greek culture. This was after their statues had continually been stolen during wars.

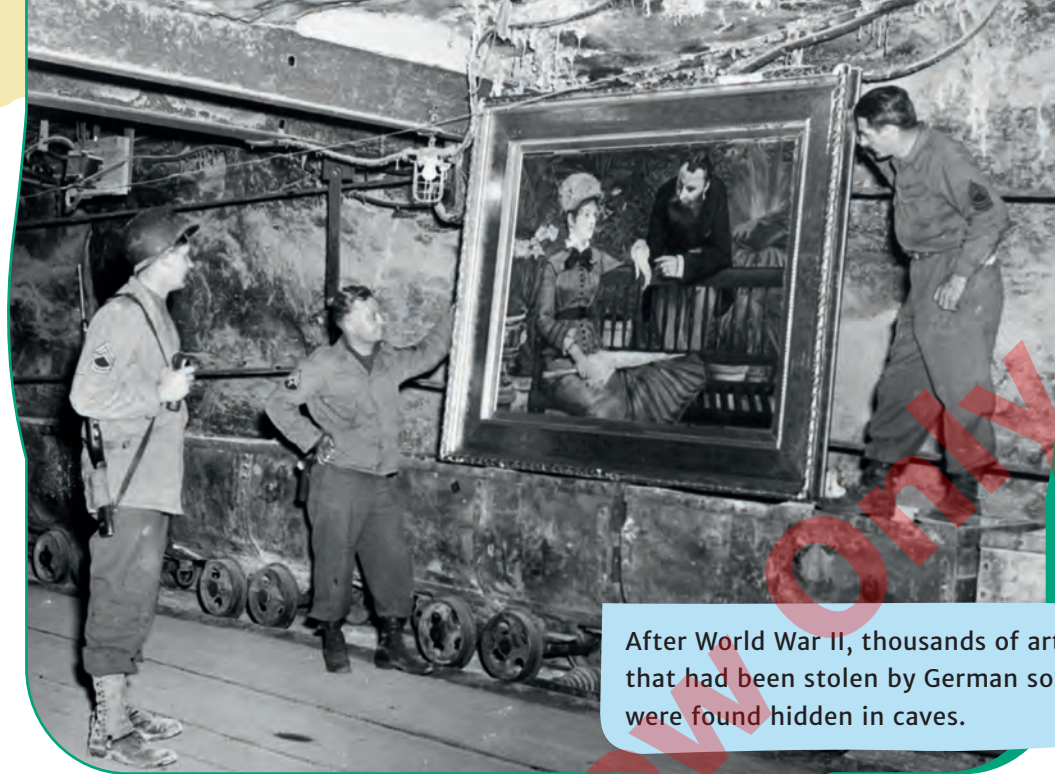
In 1815, one of the first large-scale returns of artefacts occurred. After the French emperor Napoleon was defeated, the leaders of other countries in Europe met to restore order. They forced the French to return thousands of stolen artefacts to their original owners.



The Horses of St Marks in Venice were taken by Napoleon to place on the Arc de Tromphe in Paris.

The French emperor Napoleon was known for taking artefacts from defeated countries.





After World War II, thousands of artworks that had been stolen by German soldiers were found hidden in caves.

Many artefacts were also returned after the two world wars in the twentieth century. But again, this could only happen because the countries that had won the wars could make new rules. They demanded that the governments of the defeated countries return the items they had taken during the war.

By the 1950s, people started to raise the idea that important artefacts taken from First Nations peoples should be returned to them.

An organisation called UNESCO encouraged countries to begin a new era of **cooperation** and fairness in returning artefacts. While many artefacts have been returned since then, there are countless others that haven't been.

UNESCO stands for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It continues to encourage the peaceful return of cultural artefacts, and it works to prevent further thefts from occurring.