

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/the-wests-desire-for-antiques-has-turned-museums-into-temples-of-loot#page2>

The West's desire for antiques has turned museums into temples of loot

Rafia Zakaria
December 16, 2016



A little over a week ago, an article by the Middle East journalist and historian Robert Fisk appeared in the British newspaper The Independent. Provocatively titled "Does Aleppo prove

that we westerners should keep the world's antiquities?" the piece was occasioned by Fisk's visit to the Pergamon museum in Berlin.

There, Fisk found the "Aleppo Room", a magnificent creation built in 1600 and taken from the home of a Christian-Syrian family and now on display in Berlin. Overwhelmed by its grandeur, Fisk describes the wonder as "probably the oldest surviving painted panelled room from the Ottoman Empire" and a "unique memory of the greatest civilisation of an equally unique empire".

Far too sophisticated a historian, Fisk is not one to launch into a ribald or straightforward defence of the premise that the world's heritage is safe only in the hands of the West.

Instead, he gives us a hem and shrug version of the same argument: yes, western museums benefit from and participate in the illicit trade in antiquities. Yes, westerners (the infamous Lord Elgin gets a mention here) have plundered and looted much as others are now. But then (gasp) consider the alternative: "Would we really want to send this masterpiece back to a rebuilt Aleppo?" Of course, Fisk does not need to answer; it is safe to assume that most of his readers, westerners by and large, will silently supply the emphatic no.

Fisk's position with all its seeming diffidence is a glib one. For the lucky few who enjoy the privilege and plenitude to roam the world's museums, their lives untouched by war or its detritus, imagining the loss of the Aleppo Room is a horror. In retaining control over world history, they imagine themselves its saviours. Like colonialism itself, they imagine it as a benevolent act, where the precious is protected from the ignorant and preserved for posterity.

It is a clever rationalisation, which like all rationalisations collapses quickly under analysis. Its construction depends on selecting a few portions rather than the whole of history as the basis for argument and comparison.

Included in it are a glorious past, when the Aleppo Room was constructed, and the immediate present, where it (along with so much else) faces destruction at the hands of ISIL. The relics of a glorious and tolerant Islamic past are hence posited as facing annihilation from a violent and ignorance-steeped Islamic present. Without the intervention of the benevolent West, one is certain to destroy the other.

Absent from this piecemeal past is the effect that recent western invasion and occupation have had on the archaeology and heritage of the very war-addled region under discussion.

As recently as 2005, it was westerners who were leading the pillage of the world's cherished heritage. Camp Babylon, a US military outpost was actually constructed atop the ancient city held up as the cradle of civilisation. The pavement leading to the Ishtar Gate, a staggering 2,600 years old, was crushed by bulldozer over the plaintive cries of archaeologists. Kellogg, Brown and Root, a subsidiary of the defence contractor Halliburton, cared little about the historical treasures of Babylon. If that wasn't enough, hundreds of acres, most not yet excavated, were covered up with gravel to make car parks, and soil from other parts of Babylon used to fill up sandbags.

Nor was that all of it. Simon Jenkins, writing in the Guardian in 2007, noted a tragic sight visible on the aerial approach into an American military base at Nassiriya. The ziggurat of Ur, probably the oldest city in the world, had become indistinguishable from the fuel dumps, warehouses and storage hangars that had been erected over it.

On the ground, he would learn that the 3,000-year-old Warka Vase had been shattered, the lyre of Ur, the oldest musical instrument in the world, was badly damaged. The civilised westerners who had wrought all this havoc were sorry, though; some, like the Italians and Americans, were even providing some money for "restoration" of the very antiquities they had just destroyed.

Few of these episodes are talked about anymore, and it is no surprise. When the West destroys pieces and portions of the world's history, it is but an aberration, even justifiable and necessary. For non-western others, it is deemed endemic, a pathology.

Furthermore, even as historians recognise the pillage that lay at the core of the colonial control of history (and consequently archaeology), they fail to consider its effect on the lived history of former colonies.

When British and French colonists carted antiquities back to their capitals and their museum collections, these objects were extricated not simply from the culture and context where they were created, but they became alien to the populations that shared their territorial heritage.

The existence of the antiquities market, of local economies built around western archaeological digs, enabled a further distancing, where the discovery of the past represented items for export that were too expensive for local consumption.

The global trade in antiquities, whetted by the western public's appetite for gazing at the exotic and conquered, perpetuated this estrangement into the present, leaving fragile and poor postcolonial states squabbling over where bits of heritage fit into the stories of their countries.

The British Museum, the Pergamon in Berlin and many others are, in this sense, modern temples of loot, their contents procured by colonial dominance and then the market dominance of the West that has sprung from it.

If the former was justified in the past as the West's benevolent sharing of Enlightenment values, the latter is justified now with similar machinations regarding free markets. The subjugated of now, like those of old, are saddled with the shame of economic and moral inferiority.

Robert Fisk spares no words in appreciating the grandeur and magnificence of the Aleppo Room, in having it maintained in safety accessed with the exchange of a ticket. What he forgets is that it is in his admiration of it, replicated in the desires of millions of other westerners, that it becomes unavailable, and gradually alien, to the very people whose ancestors created it