



Our approach to the return of museum objects

Further Information and guidance

Prospective claimants are encouraged to liaise informally with the Director and curatorial staff of the UCM institution in advance of any formal claim. Visit the UCM website for individual UCM institutions' contact details. This document outlines the considerations the UCM institutions will make in respect of an enquiry.

Each UCM institution has its own governing body and Collections Development Policy. Claims made for the return of material will be considered by the individual institution on a case-by-case basis.

Claims may be based on histories of acquisition, the secret and/or sacred nature of particular objects, educational and public benefit, or other grounds. They should outline the significance of the objects concerned, for example, in cultural, historical or spiritual terms.

The museum will consider whether objects were illegitimately acquired, taking into account considerations that may include:

- if they were, or may have been, acquired illegally, or exported from the nation of origin illegally
- if they were, or may have been, appropriated in the aftermath of violence, for example in the context of a colonial intrusion or war
- if they were, or may have been, acquired under circumstances whereby owners were compelled to sell them, or from people who were demonstrably not legitimate owners

It should be acknowledged that existing documentation and scholarship may not establish object histories authoritatively or definitively. Further research may be required to clarify the nature and context of transactions, or their probable nature and context. Such research should draw fully on relevant expert advice, including advice from local or Indigenous communities when relevant, and be undertaken in a consultative manner.

The museum will also consider the academic, cultural and public benefits of returning objects to a community or nation of origin, taking into account considerations that may include:

- whether specific objects may be of exceptional importance to communities and nations, such that their presence is vital to belief, culture and wellbeing
- whether specific objects are part of a historically significant collection, associated for example with a particular expedition or encounter, that should itself be considered an important historic formation and scholarly resource, which may be diminished through dispersal
- what educational, research and public value the objects have in their University of Cambridge setting
- whether the continuing sacred and/or secret significance of objects makes exhibition and/or continuing research access inappropriate or unethical

The proposed future location, conservation, exhibition and accessibility of objects will be fully considered.

The museum will also consider whether, in the particular case, there are alternatives to retention or return, which might include the loan of objects for exhibition and study purposes, on a medium or long-term basis. In all cases, collaboration with communities, museums and scholars in the nation of the collections' origin should be sought. Where UCM objects are associated with collections housed in museums elsewhere, the director and curators of the UCM institution concerned should liaise regarding the scope for a shared approach.

For objects closely associated with communities of living descendants, claims should be made by recognized organisations, representing the descendants of the customary owners of the objects in question. Such claims may be submitted by individuals, by institutions such as museums, or by national governments, with evidence of formal support from the relevant representative community organisations.

Claims should be supported by government authorities, or explicitly state why such support is inapplicable in the particular case.

For objects not closely associated with communities of living descendants, claims may be made by relevant national governments, explicitly explaining why community support is inapplicable in the particular case.

Claims made by third parties will not be considered. If the status of claimants is disputed, the museum will defer formal consideration of a claim until such issues are resolved.

The museums welcome research visits from community members and prospective claimants which may clarify areas of common ground and help shape the most feasible and appropriate approaches to the future of particular objects and collections.