Repatriation information for FOH - Bristol Culture (Museums and Galleries) – **DATED DEC 2020**

History

We have long had an open attitude to repatriation of museum objects. In 2006 and 2007 human remains were returned to national authorities representing indigenous groups in Australia and New Zealand respectively. In 2019 human remains and grave goods were returned to an indigenous group in California and in 2020 the return of a hunters’ coat to an indigenous cultural centre in Canada was agreed and is due to physically take place over the autumn/winter 2020-1.

Process

Any requests for repatriation of items from our collections are treated on a case-by-case basis. Informal initial enquiries can be undertaken with relevant curatorial staff, but once a written request, addressed to the Head of Culture & Creative Industries, is received the process of investigating the claim can begin. Information about the item(s) is gathered and evidence as to the authority and suitability of the claimant are requested. An investigation to find out whether there may be competing claims to the item(s) will also be undertaken. Once all the information is together (which can take a considerable time – often some months and even years – as handing back an item to the wrong body could be very damaging all round) a final decision will be made by the appropriate member of the Cabinet (as the Governing Body), as is required by our status as an Accredited Museum. Usually this will be the Executive Member responsible for C&CI (currently the Deputy Mayor – Councillor Craig Cheney).

Criteria

In order to investigate a claim the following minimum criteria are applied.

1.  The status of those making the request ie their right to represent the community to which the item(s) originally belonged.

2.  The continuity between the community which created the items(s) and the current community on whose behalf the request is being made.

3.  The cultural and religious importance of the object/s to the community.

A Note on the Benin Bronze Head currently on display at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

Bristol Museum & Art Gallery holds one historic Benin Bronze head in its accessioned collections (register number Ea7821), currently on display in the *Curiosity* gallery of the Bristol Museum & Art Gallery.

This Bronze came to the collection in 1935 as the result of its transfer from Cranmore Ethnographical Museum, Kent (which closed in the 1940s).  The exact provenance of this Bronze prior to this is not known, though it is probable to came from the looting of Benin City in 1897.

Bristol City Council acknowledges and recognises that the possession of historic Benin Bronzes is highly contentious and that there are calls for repatriation to Benin (Nigeria). As a consequence, Culture team staff are establishing contact with the interested parties in Nigeria and those who are currently negotiating with them across Europe as part of the Benin Dialogue Group and through the Legacy Restoration Trust in Nigeria.

We understand the current situation in Nigeria to be one that is still under discussion. Plans for a new Museum of the Royal Court have been agreed and many representatives of the local and national governments, as well as the Royal Court itself, are working towards this as a way forward. Some have agreed to loan items there, others see it as a place that returns could be made permanently. Once we have been able to establish the level of agreement for these plans we will be able to progress our discussions.

Consequently, we intend to establish an action plan regarding the future for the Bronze currently held in Bristol. Further updates will be issued over coming months, however progress may understandably be slowed by the current global crisis.