

The New York Times

Opinion

The British Stole Tipu's Magic Box. It Should Not Be for Sale.

Christie's auctioned \$109 million of Indian artifacts, items that should not be privately owned.

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• June 27, 2019



The gold "magic box" of Tipu Sultan, an 18th-century ruler of Mysore, was auctioned at Christie's this month. CreditCreditRichard Drew/Associated Press

Last week, Christie's auctioned Indian and Mughal-era jewels, daggers and royal portraits from a collection owned by a member of the Qatari royal family. The sale took in \$109 million, the highest total for any auction of Indian art and Mughal objects, and the second highest for a private jewelry collection.

Collected by Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah al-Thani, these tokens of a colonial past were pilfered, pillaged and otherwise procured as "gifts" from India. The auctioning of

stolen heritage to the highest bidder is wildly unethical. These objects must be given back.

When I went to Christie's on the day of the auction, I saw an oversize reproduction of Tipu Sultan's 20-sided gold "magic box" in the foyer. Tipu Sultan, an 18th-century ruler of the kingdom of Mysore, the land of my ancestors, was killed by the British in the fourth Anglo-Mysore War in 1799. During hand-to-hand combat in Srirangapatna, a British soldier tried to snatch a gold buckle from Tipu's belt. When Tipu fought back, the soldier shot him in the head. Tipu was found with "no ornament," bare.

The British, who didn't count the heaps of corpses at Srirangapatna, did count the wealth: over a million pounds' worth, in bags of Tipu's gold coins, arms and armor, furniture, fine cloths and of course, jewelry. So much was taken that when a list of some objects surfaced in 2012 — a tiger's head finial from Tipu's wrecked throne for George III, war dresses for the Duke of York — the list itself was auctioned.

Tipu's box was passed down from Gen. Robert Bell of the East India Company to his friend Sir Charles Hopkinson, who gave the box to his great-nephew, Hans William Sotheby. His wife, Charlotte Cornish, gave the box to her second husband, Ingram Bywater, who then bequeathed it to the great-grandson of Robert Bell, Charles Francis Bell, in 1914. After that, it seems to have been sold a few times. Sotheby's sold Tipu's box in 2005 as part of its "exotica sale." At Christie's this month, the box sold to a faceless phone buyer for \$495,000.

Another item, Tipu's tiger, an automaton of a tiger mauling a British soldier, was carted off to England, where the public could freely crank the roaring mechanism, causing some English women to faint from fear. The tiger remains one of the most popular exhibits at Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

Now that I'm an economic migrant in the diaspora, I see ghosts constantly: people who look like family I've lost, smells of food I'll never have again, jewelry stolen from my motherland. Seeing these artifacts for sale only this postcolonial anxiety concrete. Dispossession, integral to the project of colonization, makes the specter of stolen artifacts all the more uncanny: There's a moment of recognition, and then there's the grander, incapacitating reality that nothing has changed.

All told, Britain stole \$45 trillion from India — a conservative estimate that does not include debts placed on South Asia or the environmental cost of its aggressive deforestation for timber. This amount is 17 times more than Britain's annual G.D.P. today. And yet, in 2014, nearly 60 percent of Britons said they were proud of their empire, and only 15 percent thought that the colonies were worse off for their exploitation.

As the Indian member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor said in his 2015 viral speech on commonwealth reparations, "Britain's Industrial Revolution was actually premised upon the deindustrialization of India." India made Britain, not the other way around. Dr. Tharoor ended his speech requesting an apology. In the case of colonial artifacts, an apology isn't enough: Repatriation is the only viable solution.

Britain has repeatedly rejected India's request for the return of its cultural heritage, like the Koh-i-Noor diamond, taken from a 10-year-old boy ruler along with his kingdom's sovereignty in 1849, and the Sultanganj Buddha, stolen in 1862 when an ancient monastery was discovered during railway construction. The Koh-i-Noor diamond now sits in the Tower of London, and the Sultanganj Buddha in the Birmingham Museum.

In response to calls for repatriation made as recently as 2016, Britain cited its own 1963 act that forbids the British Museum from disposing of its holdings. "If you say yes to one, you suddenly find the British Museum would be empty," Prime Minister David Cameron said in 2010. "It is going to have to stay put."

The movement of artifacts in the private sector continues unhindered. Christie's international head of jewelry, Rahul Kadakia, said that the al-Thani collection was "living history in your hand." But the only history in cultural property removed from its context, however, is its story of displacement. Culture is action. Culture is in motion. Culture cannot be propped up on a red velvet as a promise of pocketable exotic beauty. You cannot sell "500 years of history."

Desire for these artifacts is mediated by the fetishization of the Orient and facilitated by cultural amnesia. Imperial collecting, as the historian Maya Jasanoff points out, was a cultural exchange by an empire whose main imperialist project was to establish difference, but also representative of how an empire is a collection of people. And so we have the British Commonwealth — a collection of stolen objects, histories and futures.

The private sale of colonial artifacts is indefensible; unlike museums, it offers no public good. We go after museums because private collectors' right to property is harder to touch. And even if people from former colonies were able to buy up all that was looted from their homelands, it would not solve the problem of returning items to their context. Nonetheless, the international sale of looted artifacts should be made illegal so that countries can negotiate repatriation, even if that is a difficult proposition.

At the Christie's auction, I sat among the richest people I'll ever see in one room — or maybe their friends, their employees. It was remarkable: At least a third of the audience was brown. All of the emeralds commanded high prices, mostly to anonymous phone bidders. "Probably a Chinese buyer," said one of my neighbors, a woman from Hong Kong who had been to many auctions. Two Indian men, perhaps a father and son, sat next to me, circling items in their slick catalogs, clutching their bidding paddles.

"Do you think we're going to get enough?" the older man said. I don't think they did, don't think they could.