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Cover photo: The Shep-en-Isis sarcophagus at the St Gallen Abbey Library. Photo: iStock

The deafening silence of Shep-en-Isis



Here's a quick, simple question: what is culture? The answer is not quite as straightforward and concise. There are a bewildering number of ways to explain culture and how we interact with it – and why it is more than just a trifling distraction. How about this for a definition? Culture embraces everything that humans create. Now add the word "art" – then we could say that both art and culture are an expression of human existence. Culture and its derivative, art, build identity – but not just individual identity. Culture is born of community, giving people a sense of belonging, a collective memory and a perspective of both the past and the future.

When you steal cultural property, you attack precisely these values. The Swiss museums currently going through their inventories with a fine-tooth comb because they own looted art are all too aware of this. Such complicated artefacts include treasures that were plundered by colonialists from the West African kingdom of Benin. Other countries have already decided to return their Benin objects. The matter is now on the agenda in Switzerland too.

Not all disputes related to cultural property arise from theft. Sometimes, the back story is a little murkier. Shep-en-Isis, the daughter of a priest, is a case in point. The Egyptian mummy and her ornate sarcophagus now lie in the St Gallen Abbey Library. Shep-en-Isis features in this edition's Focus article.

The St Gallen mummy is silent. But her silence is deafening due to the thorny questions that surround her. Why was Shep-en-Isis, a relic of ancient Egyptian culture, taken from her tomb on the Nile and shipped to St Gallen in the first place? Are we bothered by this? What if we repatriated her?

It remains to be seen how the story will end. In this context, it is ironic to note that the canton of St Gallen was once the victim of a cultural heist itself, when troops from Zurich stole a number of valuable artefacts at the beginning of the 18th century. A 300-year disagreement ensued between St Gallen and Zurich.

Incidentally, culture will be the central theme of the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in August 2023 – at a very apt venue: St Gallen.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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