

SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON

The Society's Position on Contested Heritage

Introductory Note

In the light of recent public debate about the removal of statues, Council felt that it was important for the Society to set out clearly its position on contested heritage. The statement below was developed by the Society's Policy Committee and has been approved by Council.

We recognise that these issues are contentious and divisive for many individuals and communities and are a matter of concern for those of us who are committed to studying and conserving our heritage and engaging a wider public in its dissemination.

As the statement makes clear, the Society's approach is determined by our published Values - in particular, the equal rights and status of multiple communities in their relationship with heritage and the relevance of heritage as a resource fundamental to senses of identity.

The Society will apply the same principles to its own collections of material culture and memorials from the past whenever it identifies objects which might represent a 'contested heritage'.

As part of a constructive debate on these matters, we would welcome Fellows' views.

Contested Heritage Statement

The Society exists, as stated in its Charter, to encourage, advance and further the study and knowledge of antiquities and history, without limit of date or location. The Society's Statement of Values recognises that judgements grounded in its principles will change with time and context. Actions and opinions that were perceived by many to be morally acceptable, even a cause of celebration, generations ago may be viewed very differently today – hence the current debate about 'Contested Heritage'.

'Contested Heritage' has recently been identified primarily with memorials to controversial individuals from the British imperial period, although arguments over the commemoration of particular military and political leaders from within living memory reflect essentially the same issue. There have been determined campaigns to remove specific statues and to change names.

In relation to this debate, the most relevant commitments in the Society's Statement of Values are in summary:

- the equal rights and status of multiple communities in their relationship with heritage and the relevance of heritage as a resource fundamental to senses of identity;
- the support of rigorous research, both on the remains of the past and on their societal contexts;
- the promotion of wide engagement in study, debate and appreciation of this resource, along with respect for a diversity of opinions and views;
- the value of our historic environment in social, economic and cultural terms as well as intellectual and scholarly ones;
- a duty of care to protect and conserve heritage for future generations.

The Society's position is that the full understanding of the past implied by the objectives of 'study and knowledge' includes the duty to recognise and understand both the complexity of moral, ideological and political responses to it in the present, and how activities that in modern terms are generally regarded as inexcusable were accepted in their time. To study and seek to understand the past in those terms is not, of course, to condone it. Representations and memorialisations of traumatic episodes and atrocities which appear to be celebratory at the expense of the perspective of the victims of those events do not reflect the full understanding of the past advocated by the Society. In such cases, what is essential are validated contextualisation and the provision of explanatory interpretations.

The Society's starting point is that the integrity of material evidence that contributes to our understanding of the past should be retained. Our presumption is that monuments should be retained intact/undamaged in their original setting, and that the greater their significance as evidence for the past, both in their individual right and as elements of larger schemes or assemblages, the stronger that presumption should be. In these cases understanding, contextualisation and explanation should be the response. Defacement or destruction of memorials or other public monuments is unacceptable.

However, given our recognition of multiple and conflicting views, we recognise that there may be cases where recontextualization, removal or relocation will be appropriate and desirable. Decisions need to be taken on a case-by-case basis, following public debate and a full assessment of significance and of the values attached to a memorial by different communities of interest; and they need to take account of the distinction between contemporary memorialisation in the past and later celebration.