

IN BRIEF

## Easter Islanders Ask British Museum to Return Sacred Statue, Offering Replica in Return

The Rapa Nui community has offered a basalt replica of the eight-foot, four-ton sculpture called Hoa Hakananai'a, which was stolen in 1868.

Sarah Rose Sharp 5 days ago



Hoa Hakananai'a (via Terry Robinson's [Flickrstream](#))

The eight-foot-tall Moai sculpture at the British Museum is called [Hoa Hakananai'a](#), which translates to “the stolen or hidden friend.” This name is fitting, since the four-ton statue was stolen from the island in 1868 by Royal Navy captain Richard Powell, and presented as a gift to Queen Victoria. She donated it to the national museum in London in 1869.

Now, as reported by the [Guardian](#), the Rapa Nui people, indigenous to Easter Island, would like their statue back, please and thank you. As Easter Island sits about 2,000 miles off the coast of Chile, advocates for the reclamation and restoration of Rapa Nui culture have petitioned the Chilean government to arbitrate on their behalf for the return of the work — which is not only considered an object of sacred worship, but believed to house the spirit or *mana* of the depicted deity.

While respecting religious customs tends to raise the stakes, in terms of the path of moral righteousness, it's worth noting that you're on the wrong side of Ethics 101 for stealing *anything*, even an Easter Island ashtray, and refusing to return it.

As reported by [Agence France-Presse](#), Easter Island's Ma'u Henua community, with support from the Chilean government, has offered to swap out the original piece at the British Museum for a replica. They have partnered with Hawaii's largest museum, the Bishop Museum, to produce the copy, employing modern technology and thousand-year-old Rapa Nui techniques.

“Our expert carvers will make a copy in basalt, the original stone used in the Hakananai'a moai, as an offering to Queen Elizabeth in exchange for the original,” Camilo Rapu, president of Ma'u Henua community, told reporters in Santiago.



Easter Island (via [cdschock's Flickrstream](#))

Easter Island's art and culture are exceptional in numerous ways, including its development of a mysterious hieroglyphic script, *rongorongo*, which is the only form of script native to the Pacific Islands. According to an article in [Cabinet](#), the island's spoken language, called Rapanui, lives on, but today it is written in a Latin script and its relationship to rongorongo is unclear. Some of the best examples of rongorongo adorn ceremonial ornaments and tablets that are part of the collection at — *you*

*guessed it!* — the British Museum.

This is not the first time that Chile, on behalf of the Rapa Nui, has attempted to affect the return of this and other artifacts, and, to date, the British Museum denies receiving any sort of formal petition for the statue's return. The representative, quoted in [Artnet](#), underscored the educational value of displaying the sculpture at the museum.

“We believe that there is great value in presenting objects from across the world, alongside the stories of other cultures at the British Museum,” the spokesperson said. “Hoa Hakananai'a is free to view in our Wellcome Trust Gallery and is among the most popular and most photographed exhibits with our 6 million visitors each year.”

Apparently, the delight and social media fodder of British Museum-goers is somehow germane to the conversation about correcting the appalling entitlement of ancient colonial practice. I mean, come on, do the Rapa Nui people even have an Instagram? The reclamation of an important piece of culture and history would obviously be wasted on that little, tiny island that they have the temerity to call home. It is *really far away*, and thanks to reparation and preservation efforts on the part of the Chilean government — which annexed the island in 1888 — tourists can now only visit 30 days a year, instead of 90.

The spokesperson also noted that the museum is one of the world's leading lenders and that the Trustees will always consider loan requests. How absolutely magnanimous of the British Museum, to consider lending back the thing that was taken by their military without asking! Queen Victoria would be proud!

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