

Who Owns the Past?

Passage 1: Returning Antiquities to Their Countries of Origin

by Joyce Mortimer

- 1 *Antiquities* are ancient objects and artworks. Many people visit museums to view antiquities. They enjoy seeing these relics of the ancient world as a way of understanding past cultures and sometimes connecting with their own heritage.
- 2 Museums acquire works to display from many different sources. Sometimes they purchase them. Other times they receive donations. Today there are strict ethical guidelines forbidding art that has been stolen or looted from other countries. However, artifacts that have been at museums for decades or even centuries may have arrived there by dubious<sup>1</sup> means. Now, some countries claim that museums have an obligation to restore these artifacts to their original location.
- 3 There are many examples of this debate. Perhaps the most famous is the controversy between Greece and the United Kingdom (UK) over the Elgin marbles. In the early 19th century, the Earl of Elgin had numerous sculptures taken from Greece to the UK. These included half of the surviving sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens. When Elgin did this, Greece was still a part of the Ottoman Empire. He claimed that he had received a permit to export the sculptures. Today the marbles are on display in the British Museum. However, Greece wants them to be restored to their original locations.
- 4 This issue also affects people in the United States. Many Native American tribes' antiquities are on display in museums. The museums may have acquired them at a time when Native American sites were often denigrated<sup>2</sup> and looted. Some museums have objects that were made for private Native American religious ceremonies and were never meant to be seen by the public. These include masks, shields, and objects used in funeral and medicinal rites. Since 1990 the U.S. government has, in some instances, facilitated the return of these unique cultural items from institutions that receive federal funding.

<sup>1</sup>dubious: questionable

<sup>2</sup>denigrated: belittled, looked down upon

- 5 Should museums return these antiquities? Experts disagree. Malcolm Bell III says yes. Bell is a professor emeritus<sup>3</sup> of art at the University of Virginia. He says, "Many artifacts and works of art have special cultural value for a particular community or nation. When these works are removed from their original cultural setting they lose their context and the culture loses a part of its history."
- 6 According to Bell, a country's request for the return of an antiquity "usually has a strong legal basis." It "was exported illegally, probably also excavated illegally, and . . . is now . . . stolen property." He called the return of antiquities "an expression of justice."
- 7 James Cuno says not always. Cuno is the president of the J. Paul Getty Trust, an art museum in Los Angeles. He is also past president of the Art Institute of Chicago and the author of the book *Who Owns Antiquity?* Cuno agrees that museums have "an ethical and legal obligation" to return illegally exported antiquities. However, he doesn't support the return of legally acquired works.
- 8 "Territory held today by a given nation-state in the past likely belonged to a different political entity . . . even if one wanted to reunite dispersed works of art, where would one do so? Which among the many countries, cities, and museums in possession of parts of a work of art . . . should be the designated 'home' of the reunited work?" Cuno believes that museums should collect art from the world's diverse cultures. This should be done "through purchase or long-term loan and working in collaboration with museums and nations around the world."
- 9 This debate is far from over. As a complex question with no easy answer, the issue requires more study.

<sup>3</sup>professor emeritus: retired professor

"Returning Antiquities to Their Countries of Origin" by Joyce Mortimer. Written for educational purposes.

Passage 2: A Case in Antiquities for 'Finders Keepers'

by John Tierney

- 10 Zahi Hawass regards the Rosetta Stone . . . as stolen property languishing in exile. "We own that stone," he told Al Jazeera,<sup>1</sup> speaking as the secretary general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities.
- 11 The British Museum does not agree—at least not yet. But never underestimate Dr. Hawass when it comes to this sort of custody dispute. He has prevailed so often in getting pieces returned to what he calls their "motherland" that museum curators are scrambling to appease him.
- 12 Last month, after Dr. Hawass suspended the Louvre's excavation in Egypt, the museum promptly returned the ancient fresco fragments he sought. Then the Metropolitan Museum of Art made a pre-emptive display of its "appreciation" and "deep respect" by buying a piece of a shrine from a private collector so that it could be donated to Egypt.
- 13 Now an official from the Neues Museum in Berlin is headed to Egypt to discuss Dr. Hawass's demand for its star attraction, a bust of Nefertiti.
- 14 These gestures may make immediate pragmatic sense for museum curators worried about getting excavation permits and avoiding legal problems. But is this trend ultimately good for archaeology?
- 15 Scientists and curators have generally supported the laws passed in recent decades giving countries ownership of ancient "cultural property" discovered within their borders. But these laws rest on a couple of highly debatable assumptions: that artifacts should remain in whatever country they were found, and that the best way to protect archaeological sites is to restrict the international trade in antiquities.
- 16 In some cases, it makes aesthetic or archaeological sense to keep artifacts grouped together where they were found, but it can also be risky to leave everything in one place, particularly if the country is in turmoil or can't afford to excavate or guard all its treasures. After the Metropolitan Museum was pressured to hand over a collection called the Lydian Hoard, one of the most valuable pieces was stolen several years ago from its new home in Turkey.

<sup>1</sup>Al Jazeera: a media network that seeks to report unbiased, diverse accounts of global issues

- 17 Restricting the export of artifacts hasn't ended their theft and looting any more than the war on drugs has ended narcotics smuggling. Instead, the restrictions promote the black market and discourage the kind of open research that would benefit everyone except criminals.
- 18 Legitimate dealers, museums and private collectors have a financial incentive to pay for expert excavation and analysis of artifacts, because that kind of documentation makes the objects more valuable. A nation could maintain a public registry of discoveries and require collectors to give scholars access to the artifacts, but that can be accomplished without making everything the property of the national government.
- 19 The timing of Dr. Hawass's current offensive, as my colleague Michael Kimmelman reported, makes it look like retribution against the Westerners who helped prevent an Egyptian from becoming the leader of Unesco, the United Nation's cultural agency. But whatever the particular motivation, there is no doubt that the cultural-property laws have turned archaeological discoveries into political weapons.

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### **Passage 3: Vision of Home: Repatriated Works Back in Their Countries of Origin**

by Rachel Donadio

- 20 In recent years, museums across the United States and Europe have begun returning objects to their countries of origin. Each case tells its own story. While much attention has focused on the act of repatriation,<sup>1</sup> The New York Times looked at what happened to several objects after they went back. Some works, returned with great fanfare, have taken on greater meaning back on view in the countries or cultures that produced them. Other times, after the triumphalism fades, they fall victim to benign<sup>2</sup> neglect, or are not always easy to reach.

<sup>1</sup>repatriation: bringing or sending back to a country or one's place of citizenship

<sup>2</sup>benign: not trying to harm

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- 21 Most Western museums now acknowledge a strong ethical case for returning objects, especially if they have been found to have left their countries of origin under dubious circumstances, as in the case of the goddess of Morgantina. The Getty, which had bought the statue in 1988 for \$18 million, returned it to Italy in 2011 after Italian prosecutors found that it had been looted, illegally exported and sold by dealers who very likely dissembled about its provenance.<sup>3</sup> . . .
- 22 The goddess of Morgantina is now on display in the archaeological museum of Aidone. The idea was to spread Italy's treasures around the country and to allow viewers to see the work in the context in which it was found. The statue, returned to the music of police bands, now stands proudly on a metal stand in the museum. . . .
- 23 These treasures await those who make the sometimes difficult journey. About a 90-minute drive west of Catania, Aidone is in the province of Enna, Sicily's poorest, and is less than 15 miles from Piazza Armerina, whose Roman-era mosaics, part of a Unesco World Heritage site, are among the most visited spots in Sicily. But the island, renowned for political corruption, lacks reliable public transportation. Local roads are sometimes closed.
- 24 Last year, 30,767 people visited the Aidone museum, and about 26,000 visited Morgantina, compared with 400,000 people who visited the Getty Villa in 2010, the last year the statue was on display there.
- 25 Across-the-board public budget cuts have left the museum with few resources for maintenance, guards and publicity, said Laura Maniscalco, an archaeologist who has been director of the Aidone museum since fall. "I don't think it's up to me to create tourist itineraries," Ms. Maniscalco said. "But I can complain about the closed roads. Why aren't they fixed? These are political problems."

<sup>3</sup>dissembled about its provenance: lied about its origin or how they got it

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