

To return of not to return: discussions of art reciprocity



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Should countries return historical artifacts/artwork to their country of origin or original owners? The topic of art reciprocity is complex and not easily answered without considering many different factors, some of which include political, cultural and economic. When possible after these factors are considered, works of art that were stolen, illegally or immorally obtained should be returned to their rightful owners or the country of origin when the owner is no longer living. There are cases, however that it is not feasible for the artifacts to be returned. In those cases, the right thing to do is for the holder of the artifacts to clearly give credit to the artist or the origins of the artifacts themselves. Each case must be decided for itself and not fall under the blanket of one idea, however. There are many cases of artifacts being destroyed either by natural disasters or simply because a religious or political groups have decided it wasn't moral. In these cases, property should be shared.

Political instability and natural disasters can threaten cultural property anywhere - with it's the more than 4, 000 medieval manuscripts destroyed by Islamist militant in Mali in the 2013 or the galleries and art collections in New York City damaged by flooding during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Allowing the world's museums to share cultural property through loans or acquisitions would reduce some of these risks. (Cummo 128).

Political Issues

Along with issues of culture there are politics involved in returning art and artifacts to countries of origin. Governments must work together to make a

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plan and to determine the best actions to take. This can be a very difficult process because of the ways the artifacts may have been taken or just a matter of discussions and agreements between countries. As countries deal with each other, there also is consideration of illegal activities by museum directors. In the case of King Croesus' golden brooch as cited in Beauchemin, the brooch was looted, repatriated, and then stolen to pay off a "corrupt museum director's" gambling debt. (3).

The UN has decided to take a stance on the subject and "more than half of the 192 member nations of the UN have laws that either grant the state ownership of ancient objects found within their borders or restrict their export without state approval" (Cuno 124). It must also be taken into consideration the country in which these pieces are traveling. How safe are they during the transportation process and what state is the country in when they get there. Unstable countries or countries in constant warfare don't always provide a safe place for the artifacts to remain whole. (Beauchemin 3).

Cultural Issues

One of the more sensitive issues that go along with returning artworks and artifacts are those that have cultural ties. These can be delicate and uncomfortable discussions to have but are needed to resolve the issues or to at least have conversations about them. Some situations are almost easy to determine. Paintings and other artifacts that were taken by the Nazis during World War II have such emotional ties to their families that it's almost always a yes to the question "should they be returned"? Other artifacts that were

acquired during invasions thousands of years ago are not so easily answered. “ All of a sudden, paintings that had been part of the “ mythology” of the family are alive and there’s hope. There a change.” (Waxman 1). It makes it especially difficult if the original country has leadership that doesn’t cherish these artifacts or will only let them be destroyed.

Lubow talks about “ nations whose ancient past is typically more glorious than their recent history” is holding (1) the “ framework” (1) for arguments of Universities and museums holding on to acquired artifacts for public display instead of returning. These are valid arguments for both sides. As in the case of the country of Peru and Yale University, if the artifacts were returned there would be a huge dent in the collection for the British Smithsonian, the Louvre and other museums where people go to enjoy these pieces and learn about the Peruvian culture. On the other hand, Lubow cites the feelings of the Peruvian people who must go to other countries to view their own culture.

Even within the art community there are differing opinions of what to do with the pieces. Farago discussed differences between entire cultures such as the indigenous of Australia, and that of just the country of ownership.

But in the case of works of art from indigenous Australia, we are looking at a very different question. Here the petitioners for restitution are not the government of the Commonwealth of Australia, but rather contemporary indigenous communities whose understanding of culture, time and kinship

comes into direct conflict with the imperative of the Western museum (Farago 3).

The History Today article cites a quote from Marie Rodet, Senior Lecturer in the History of Africa, University of London as saying “ It’s time for museums to do their job”. Many curators argue that finding the country of origin is difficult or often impossible. Rodet argues “ galleries, museums and private collectors have never made the effort to know the history of the artefacts in their possession; or worse, they know, but don’t want to acknowledge, the circumstances under which they were acquired. (History Today 3).

Economic Issues

As with all major issues, the talk of money always enters the discussion and is part of the decision making process. Graykowski discusses the morality of returning “ Nazi-looted art” (Waxman 4), but also says it isn’t really about money. Some governments would disagree citing price tags of millions of dollars to acquire art and return to countries of origin. The economic issues always seem to be bigger than any other issue. Countries want to be ensured that they aren’t losing out financially, but at the same time when items have been gathered by illegal means or through immoral activity, the economic issues are less important. There are too many questions surrounding the economics of art repatriation. Who pays the owners? Which owners or ancestors should be paid and how much? Are market values taken into consideration? The other major consideration in the economics are the large amounts of art smugglers and fake artifacts that are passed off as realistic.

These make the arguments even more difficult to solve for world leaders and those in the art community.

Conclusion

There are no short and easy answers to the question of art reciprocity. There are many factors to consider, some of which I discussed here. There are many economic, cultural and political factors that must be discussed and decided upon as well as a general sense of morality when determine if art pieces and artifacts should be returned to the country of origin or original owners. When leaders and those in charge of the care of ancient artifacts and important pieces can work together to better understand the meanings these pieces have to their cultures and the larger importance they hold for the world. Communication and peaceful discussions must be done so the world can continue to enjoy and learn from these pieces. Credit must be given to the original owners as well as the countries of origin with explanations of how the pieces were acquired to create a sense of fairness for everyone. “ Historic artefacts are representative not only of humanity’s achievements, but of the travel and traffic that have formed the world order we all now inhabit.” (History Today 4).

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