

Ethical Efforts to Return Stolen Antiquities to Their Origin Countries

Our society's focus on ethical dealings with antiquities has brought a renewed interest in ensuring that valuable cultural objects, including those in museums, have not been wrongfully taken from other countries. Over the past decade, the U.S. has increased efforts to repatriate stolen ancient objects to their origin countries, often with the help of prosecutors investigating art fraud. Recently, the Manhattan District Attorney in New York, seized 27 ancient artifacts worth 13 million dollars from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to return them to Italy and Egypt, their home countries. In all, these officials have returned 2,000 works of antiquity held by U.S. museums and private owners which were wrongfully procured from other countries during times of war or Western colonizations, or through outright fraud and theft. In many cases, museums and private owners do not know that the items were acquired illegally, although sometimes they have suspicions or are even complicit. Often thieves and raiders of archeological sites sell to multiple middlemen before the objects reach their final destinations obscuring connections to smuggling rings.

Some of the more publicized repatriations were the Met's return to Egypt of the gilded coffin of Nejemankh in 2019 after discovering it was stolen by a sophisticated criminal enterprise during the 2011 Arab Spring conflicts in the Middle East. Indeed, the former Director of The Louvre was arrested recently for allegedly conspiring with Middle Eastern antiquities smugglers who have looted extensively from Syria, Libya and Iraq during decades of wars. This summer, the Met returned Greek and Roman artifacts "The Marble Head of Athena" and "The Bronze Statuette of Jupiter" when it was discovered that a French art dealer had falsified ownership documents. In the Hobby Lobby art fraud case, the owners of the crafting chain store obtained tablets from the ruins of the ancient Sumarian city of Irisagrig, one of earth's first civilizations, which were stolen by raiders then trafficked through the United Arab Emirates. These cases where there is proveable art fraud are clear-cut situations warranting the return of the artifacts,

There are some situations, however, where it is less obvious what the proper result should be. For example, the British Museum owns the Egyptian Rosetta Stone, the linguistic key to deciphering hieroglyphics, considered by many to be the most important Egyptian artifact ever uncovered. Egypt has requested its return to its native country, but the

British Museum will not relinquish the icon. It was captured by British forces in 1799 during Napoleon's invasion of North Africa, where England supported Egypt against the French. In broad terms, the main arguments for repatriation of ancient artifacts to the country of origin is not only that it is morally correct, but also that cultural objects belong together with the cultures that created them since they are part of a country's rich history and identity. The opposing argument made by museums to keep their acquired antiquities is that a blanket policy of returning artifacts because they were created elsewhere would result in no museum collections and little ability for large groups of the world's citizens to view these incredible arts of the ancient societies. Moreover, returning artifacts to war torn countries or countries without the means or security to care for the treasures would greatly risk their preservation. Usually, these more complex cases of requests for repatriation made to museums by origin countries are resolved through negotiation and on a case by case basis depending on the artifact and how it was procured.

What is most important is that a balanced ethical approach be taken with respect to all antiquities so that art theft and plundering of ancient treasures is prevented, important cultural artifacts be returned to origin countries when fairness dictates this result, and that the safety and

preservation of these artifacts be prioritized so that future generations may marvel at and learn from them.