Exhibiting Archaeology: Archaeology and Museums

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Abstract
From their beginnings, archaeology museums have reflected a complex and dynamic balance between the demands of developing, documenting, and preserving objects on the one hand and sharing knowledge, access, and control on the other. This balance has informed and inflected the ways that museums present the past, including both practical aspects of pedagogy and exhibition design as well as more critical and contested issues of authority, authenticity, and reflexivity in interpretation. Meeting the complex requirements of curation, deliberate collections growth, management, and conservation, as well as the need to respond to continuing challenges to the museum’s right and title to hold various forms of cultural property, archaeological museums play an active role in both preserving and shaping the public’s view of the past and reflect the prospects and perils of being at once a temple to the muses and a forum for sometimes contentious public discourse.
INTRODUCTION
Museums were once the primary venue for archaeological research, and although the academy supplanted the museum in this role over the course of the twentieth century (Willey & Sabloff 1980), museums are still recognized as “the main institutional connection between archaeology as a profession and discipline, and wider society” (Shanks & Tilley 1992, p. 68). By any measure, they remain powerful forces for the communication of archaeological information. A 2001 survey in Great Britain found that visiting museums and galleries was a more popular activity than watching soccer games or any other live sporting event (MORI, p. 7), and a 2000 statistically representative survey of 1016 American adults found that 88% had visited museums interpreting archaeological materials (Ramos & Duganne 2000, p. 21).

Scholars differ over what constitutes a museum (Ginsburgh & Mairesse 1997, Hudson 1998), however, and in many respects an appropriate definition depends on the context of the discussion and why a definition is sought (Alexander & Alexander 2008, Weil 1990). For our purposes, I focus on informal educational institutions [equivalent to Paris & Hapgood’s (2002, p. 39) informal learning environments], which hold archaeological collections and interpret them through regular exhibitions for one or more audiences; I set aside entities which interpret the past without the benefit of actual objects (such as science centers), and repositories which hold objects without an explicit charge to interpret them for the public. Many issues identified here cross these admittedly arbitrary boundaries, but the need of museums to balance constantly the conflicting demands of access and interpretation on the one hand and preservation and stewardship on the other creates a dynamic tension less evident in these other kinds of entities, where priority is given to one or the other side of the equation. This balance also organizes the discussion that follows, considering in turn the changing role of museums, complexities of interpreting the past for multiple audiences, the epistemological dimensions of museum interpretation, curation and conservation of the past’s tangible remains, and challenges to the rights of museums to claim good title to various categories of cultural objects.

THE CHANGING ROLE
OF MUSEUMS
Most of the earliest archaeological museums were founded either as a byproduct of antiquarian research or to promote social betterment through access to works of art and science [see Pearce (1995) for a general history of collecting in the European tradition and see Swain (2007) for an abbreviated history of archaeological museum collecting]. Museums themselves have evolved from private entities through public charities into nonstock corporations or units of government (Hall 1992). This shift had the effect of moving many museums from a narrow focus on the interests and passions of the individuals who built the collection (e.g., Larson 2009, McMullen 2009) to a broadly defined emphasis on public betterment, and more recently a better-defined emphasis on meeting the needs of specific audiences, largely owing to shifts in governance that placed key stakeholders in governance positions. Hudson (1998) argues that it can be asserted

…with confidence that the most fundamental change that has affected museums…is the now universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself to be under no such obligation. It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them. It was reasonably adequately financed, and its visitors, usually not numerous, came in to look, to wonder and to admire what was set before them. They were in no sense partners in the enterprise. The museum’s prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors. (p. 43)

The public service and educational roles of museums were articulated by late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century museum leaders including John Cotton Dana (1920), William
Henry Flower (1898), Franz Boas (1974 [1905]), G. Brown Goode (1891), Alexander Ruthven (1931), and Harlan Smith (1912), among others. Earlier generations had implicitly assumed this educational role; indeed Thomsen is remembered not only for the three-age system but for his tireless educational efforts. In an age when access to the British Museum was limited to 60 persons a day, each screened by the porter to make sure they were the right sort (Hudson 1987), Thomsen met and led tours of the Danish National Museum by groups of every kind to promote both general knowledge of the past and through that knowledge social betterment of the masses. Lord Elgin took a similar view in exporting the contested marbles from the East pediment of the Parthenon to London, suggesting the marbles might have “some benefit on the progress of taste” (St. Clair 1998). Although more recent generations of scholars have carefully deconstructed these views to examine the ideological stances and stereotypes informing them (e.g., Hamilakis 1999, Hitchens et al. 1998), it is worth recalling that the conscious motivations of these early antiquarians were largely educational. More recently, this educational role of museums has been affirmed by major professional organizations; in *Excellence and Equity*, the American Association of Museums (AAM) (1992) stated that museums must place education—in the broadest sense of the word—at the center of their public service role and make their educational role central to their activities.

This educational role is crucial to both the development of modern archaeological museums and the wide range of critical approaches to them because it requires that museums move from passive repositories to active arbiters and interpreters of the past. Throughout the nineteenth century (and I suggest well into the twentieth) most museum archaeologists believed “in the explanatory power and epistemological transparency of objects, specimens, things” (Conn 2004, p. 117). The more subtle role of museums in creating or altering perceptions about the past is now well established, although one could argue that recognition of this role is part of a logical historical progression in how the tangible objects of the past have been understood and used in constructing epistemological frameworks (e.g., Anderson 2004).

For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, museums were concerned with organizing and arranging objects to document the time periods and cultures that produced them (e.g., Holmes 1902). Objects were treated as index fossils, whose form and character allowed archaeologists or antiquarians to draw valid inferences regarding the dating of sites and the identification of cultural complexes associated with the site or site component. The advent of chronometric techniques in the twentieth century allowed and promoted a focus on cultural process rather than culture history and altered the ways in which material culture implicated, inscribed, and informed processual studies. More recently, postprocessual studies have recruited both museum objects and the institutions that house them in critical reexaminations of how material objects were appreciated and appropriated by agents in societies past and present—critiques that react against processual excesses while to some degree premised on the epistemological emphases they established.

**EXPLANATION AND PRESENTATION**

Although the educational mandate of archaeological museums is clear, whether they have been particularly effective achieving that mandate through exhibitions remains debatable (e.g., see articles in McManus 1996). One sobering statistic emerged from surveys of public attitudes toward archaeology; although 88% of respondents said they had visited a museum exhibiting archaeological materials, only 9% reported learning anything about archaeology from museums (Ramos & Duganne 2000, p. 12). Television remains the most popular vehicle for learning about the past (Ramos & Duganne 2000), and relatively few media—even formal instructional textbooks—reach about the past consistently. A 1990 study, for
example, found “textbooks from all parts of the world that ignore contemporary understandings of the prehistoric past” (MacKenzie & Stone 1990, p. 3).

Available data suggest that people interpret the past in light of their own experiences and cultural constructs; we see the past not as it was but as we are. This mindset is more than a naïve extension of one’s own views, but an active strategy pursued even when presented with seemingly authoritative information that contradicts these constructs (Wineburg 2001). Although it has long been recognized by museum professionals that people want to play an active role in interpreting the past and making it meaningful, in all the complex meanings of the term (Davis 2000, Falk & Dierking 2000, Jameson 1997, Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998, Rowan & Baram 2004, Stone & Molyneaux 1994), recent studies suggest this desire may be crucial to learning success (e.g., Roschelle 1995). Dierking (2002) argues that three overlapping learning contexts contribute to the way children (at least) interact with and apprehend objects. The personal context includes motivation and expectation, interest, prior knowledge and experience, and dimensions of choice and control. The sociocultural context includes within-group sociocultural mediation, specifically social aspects of learning within the immediate group, and mediation facilitated by others, including parents, teachers, docents, or others. Finally, the physical context includes advance preparation, setting and immediate environment, design elements of the experience, and subsequent reinforcing events and experience (see also Falk & Dierking 2000). Despite best efforts, however, none of these three primary contexts are entirely within a museum’s control.

Davis (2005) offers a constructivist approach to student learning in archaeology, identifying six distinct types of learning strategies. The types are distinguished by whether the learner sees knowledge as constructed or acquired, the degree of proficiency achieved in this knowledge, and whether they tend to articulate and process this knowledge as narratives or analytical processes (pp. 99–103). Individual learners may shift fluidly between strategies depending on context, structure of information, and proficiency. Different kinds of experiences and pedagogical practices are needed to effectively engage students employing different learning strategies. Museum-based programs tend to have shorter encounter times with visitors or students than do other kinds of venues, they tend to be more dependent on self-guided activities, and they require greater knowledge of visitor preconceptions well in advance of exhibition creation or programmatic activities. Thus, successful programs often depend on detailed visitor studies to understand the needs and background of diverse audiences (p. 142). She notes that many of the techniques she has found successful “require significant investments of both time and money,” which she recognizes “may seem extravagant or even impossible, given the kinds of constraints that many schools and nonprofit organizations have to contend with” (p. 160).

Pedagogical approaches in museums generally focus on either objects or ideas, what Weil (1990, 1995) called emphasis on the “isness” of objects or their “aboutness” (see also Witcomb 1997). Greenblatt (1991) united these apparently disparate paradigms as focusing on different dimensions of objects, which he called “wonder” and “resonance” [wonder being the ability of an object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks (read masterwork) and resonance being the ability of objects to evoke a larger world or set of cultural forces], arguing that successful exhibitions required elements of both and that “the poetics and politics of representation are most completely fulfilled in the experience of wonderful resonance and resonant wonder” (p. 54). Exhibitions, then, can succeed by offering elements that provide wonder and other elements (or moments) that contextualize and embed the object through resonance.

A broad range of museum literature examines the morphology or logistics of exhibitions, including such elements as traffic flow, sight lines, dwell time (or the amount of time a visitor spends in front of a particular element), and diligence (whether visitors fully examine
exhibit elements and signage or select a subset of available options; treatments of both individual installations and more general best practices can be found in journals including Visitor Studies Today or Visitor Behavior, Art Education, Journal of Museum Education, Curator, Museum Management and Curatorship, and Exhibitionist: A Journal of Reflective Practice; see also general works on exhibit development and design such as Dean (1994) and Lord & Lord (2002). Pearce (1990) suggests three additional dimensions in archaeological exhibits. “Depth” is the relative number of distinct spaces that must be crossed to move from one exhibit element to another. “Rings” measure the number of alternative paths a visitor may use to traverse an exhibition without backtracking, and “entropy” measures the relative linearity or simplicity of the layout. More than measures of visitor behavior, however, Pearce (1990) argues that these dimensions directly structure how information is perceived by the visitor. Shallow depth and low ring factors “present knowledge as if it were a map of a well-known terrain where the relationship of each part to the other, and all to the whole, is thoroughly understood” (p. 150). By contrast, she argues, exhibits with a high entropy value, considerable depth, and high ring factor “show knowledge as a proposition which may stimulate further, or different, answering propositions” (p. 150).

Cotton & Wood (1996) provide a detailed discussion of the thinking that went into the design of a specific archaeological exhibition, People Before London, a prehistory installation at the Museum of London. In an intriguing twist, curators and designers went beyond take-home messages regarding specific cultural units or time periods and posed direct, reflexive questions to the visitor, including “Can you believe what we say?”, to problematize the issue of authority in archaeological exhibitions.

AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION

Museums and their use of objects have faced critiques from feminists (Porter 1996), structuralists (Bal 1992), poststructuralists (Bennett 1995), postmodernists (Crimp 1995), and postcolonial theorists (Clifford 1997, Rigg 1994; see also Sherman 1994 for a more general treatment of critiques of museum-as-institution) and a range of postprocessualist critiques from within archaeology itself (Shanks & Tilley 1992). Many of the broader anthropological critiques regarding formalism, primitivism, authenticity, and historicism in museum settings (Jones 1993) can also be generalized to apply to archaeological museum exhibitions (see also Crew & Sims 1991). Bourdieu (1984) has argued that museums serve primarily to maintain existing class distinctions; although his arguments were originally specific to art museums, they have been expanded by other scholars and applied to archaeological, heritage, and cultural museums more generally (Bennett et al. 1991, Merriman 1989). Museum exhibitions can reify and perpetuate stereotypical understandings; Wood (1997) shows that stereotypical presentations of gender roles persist in many archaeological museums. By contrast, Wood & Cotton (1999) carefully consider how gender was presented in People Before London. The appearance of past peoples as conjectural is also emphasized at the Keiller Museum in Wiltshire, England, where a single figure is depicted with two very different sets of clothing, hairstyles, and tattoos on either side of his body. Although aptly illustrating the ambiguity of presentations of the past, Swain (2007) notes that the figure “comes across as a rather badly dressed 1980s shop dummy” (p. 214). Interpreting people of the past also raises complex issues regarding representation and the role of living communities in controlling, framing, and interpreting their own pasts (e.g., Ames 1991, 1992; Colwell-Chanthaphonh & Ferguson 2006; Hendry 2005; Isaac 2005; Karp et al. 1992; Kuklick 1991; Lawlor 2006; Levy 2006; Simpson 2007; Sleeper-Smith 2009; see also Peers 2007).

For Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Johnson 1993) museums play a key role in consecrating objects, embodying and perpetuating theories of how objects should be appropriately apprehended, understood, and contextualized. Whitehead
(2009), following Vergo’s (1994) notion that museums create their own contexts, argues further that museums create an environment that encourages certain kinds of theorizing (an argument analogous in many respects to the reception aesthetics views of Wolfgang Iser (1980) and Hans Robert Jauss (1982) in literary theory).

This view of objects, whether individually or as exhibitions, as signs that can be read reflects a textual view of representation which had permeated history by the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Conn 2004), and is commonplace in studies of museum interpretation (e.g., van Kraayenoord & Paris 2002). Pearce (1990, 1992) employs a Saussurean construct to understand how visitors understand and “read” archaeological exhibitions. Perhaps the most familiar examples of this approach are the post-processual critiques of archaeology by Hodder (1986) and of museums by Shanks & Tilley (1992). Vogel (1991) has suggested that “the fact that museums recontextualize and interpret objects is a given, and requires no apologies.” Instead, museums should “allow the public to know that [museums are] not a broad frame through which the art and culture of the world can be inspected, but a tightly focused lens that shows the visitor a particular point of view.” She concludes “it could hardly be otherwise” (p. 201).

One of the most intriguing theoretical works affecting interpretation of archaeological artifacts is that of the late Alfred Gell (1998). Gell’s approach is equally radical but is based on an utter rejection of meaning as an appropriate way of understanding things and on the bankruptcy of precisely the textual approaches on which Shanks and Tilley depend as useful avenues for anthropological understanding of objects. “I entirely reject,” Gell writes “the idea that anything, except language itself, has ‘meaning’ in the intended sense” (Gell 1998, p. 6). Instead Gell sees objects as ways of doing something, as social entities imbued with the ability to act as ‘secondary agents,’ and examines “the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process.” Although Gell’s approach presents a series of interpretive problems for both scholars and those who view displays of objects understood from this perspective, it represents a bold departure from existing treatments of objects and their practical contextualization. However, this approach also entails the proposition that an exhibition is likewise a work of art designed to have an effect, is itself an artifact of the kind and with the properties of the works it presents, and should be understood in terms of the social relationships it mediates—an approach that fits comfortably within visitor-centric constructs commonly encountered in museum studies as a discipline (Black 2005).

The centrality of issues of authority and authenticity have been apparent since the very beginning of museums. The Library and Musaeum of Alexandria (better remembered today for its destruction than for its encyclopedic stature) received important works to be copied, then quietly returned the copy rather than the original to the lender to ensure the authority and authenticity of its holdings (Bagnall 2002, p. 356; Heller-Roazen 2002, p. 133). Institutions such as the Musaeum (then and now) play an important role in nation building and definition of a group’s social identity (Crinson 2001, Kaplan 1994, Kohl 1998, Launius 2007, Linenthal & Engelhardt 1996), but only recently have these practices become the subject of direct ethnographic inquiry (Handler & Gable 1997, Davis 2005). One such study examines the Musaeum itself: Butler (2007) uses ethnographic approaches to study the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a joint Egyptian/UNESCO project completed in 2002.

CURATION AND CONSERVATION

Collections lie at the heart of the museum, the *sine qua non* of the museum as an institution. As Swain has argued (2007, p. 91), of all the elements that constitute a museum (staff, buildings, donors, galleries, collections, etc.), any one could be removed without changing the fundamental character of the institution,
except the collections. They define the profile and prospects of the institution in ways more profound and lasting than do mission statements or current circumstances. The importance of appreciating why humans collect and use tangible things to make sense of the past is recognized both through a range of individual scholarly studies (e.g., Pearce 1992, 1995, Wertsch 2002; see also articles in Knell 1999, Krech & Hall 1999, Pearce 1994) and entire journals (e.g., *Journal of the History of Collections* or *Collections: A Journal for Museums and Archives Professionals*, among others).

Pearce (1997) has identified six distinct kinds of objects comprising archaeological collections in museums: (a) chance finds, usually received as single pieces or small groups and generally lacking meaningful documentation; (b) private collections amassed by individuals, with or without accompanying documentation; (c) material from museum-based excavation projects, usually accompanied by complete documentation; (d) material from excavations by other bodies or institutions, with the level of accompanying documentation varying by age and quality of excavation; (e) materials accepted from fieldwork or cultural resources management (CRM) projects, often through curation agreements, which should in general be accompanied by levels of documentation specified in the curation agreement; and (f) material from metal detectorists, a category more commonly separable in British museums than elsewhere.

It remains unclear, however, whether all collections objects are equal. Thomas (cited in Swain 2007) has argued for the concept of the “total collection,” in which every object in the collection is equally valued; Swain (2007, p. 95) by contrast argues for an implicit hierarchy in practice in which some exhibitable or complete objects often have greater perceived value than do others. The truth likely lies somewhere in between, with the relative value or utility of an object depending on the specific purposes or needs on which it is called to address.

Whitehead (2009) has argued that museums are constitutive rather than reflective of their fields; museums do not simply show art but by doing so define its nature. Archaeological museums do the same, establishing the ground on which (and from which) different conceptions of the past are contested. Archaeologists do not actually study the past, but instead study those remains of the past that persist into the present to make inferences about that past; time is perhaps the most salient analytical dimension in archaeology but one which must always be inferred. Archaeological museums played a crucial role both in the development of cultural history as an approach and in the construction of alternative temporocultural frameworks for classifying archaeological remains in time and space prior to the advent of chronometric dating techniques (Lyman et al. 1997). Although the importance of museums and museum-affiliated archaeologists (including, among others, Thomsen, Worsaae, Holmes, Wissler, Flinders Petrie, Uhle, Lothrop, Kidder, Woolley, Phillips, McKern, Ford, and Willey) is generally understood in this regard, the profound importance and immediacy of collections are not fully appreciated. Thomsen is widely credited with the three-age system, but it had been previously proposed for Scandinavian archaeology by Vedel-Simonsen and seconded by both Magnus Bruzelius (prior to Thomsen’s reorganization of the National Museum collections) and Sven Nilsson. Heizer (1962) traces a long continental ancestry, including mention in the works of Mercati, Eccard, Borlase, Rothe, Pennant, Hodgson, Büsching, and Goguet, among others. It was less the proposal of the three-age system (which after all could be pressed earlier to the times of Hesiod and Lucretius) than its application to physical museum collections by Thomsen in 1836 and G.C. Friedrich Lisch in 1837, with its utility confirmed through excavations by J.J.A. Worsaae in Denmark published in the 1840s, that makes Thomsen’s contribution a watershed. Later in the nineteenth century the same logic—but a different set of organizing principles—were used by Otis Mason to organize the archaeological material in the Smithsonian. Instead of a threefold system based on the stuff of which bladed weapons were made, Mason used Lewis
Henry Morgan’s evolutionary sequence from savagery through barbarism to civilization to provide both a context for understanding material variability and a rationale for the directionality of change (Sullivan & Childs 2003, pp. 5–6; later Mason was instrumental in defining New World culture areas in a continuing attempt to better map changes in material form onto both time and later space). McKern’s development of the midwestern taxonomic method was similarly a museum-based iterative process of organizing data—largely physical collections—into units that could be meaningfully discussed and compared by archaeologists; it differed from the systems of Thomsen and Otis (among others) in being explicitly nonevolutionary in character. Precisely because McKern was interested in understanding temporal and historical relationships, he explicitly excluded them from the classificatory framework.

Whereas archaeological curators wrestle with the problem of how best to document and depict time, archaeological conservation attempts to forestall its effects. Cheating time is only partially effective at best, but enormous strides have been made in both the theory and the practice of conservation, both in field (Sease 1994) and in laboratory (Cronyn & Robinson 1990, May & Jones 2006). As part of a larger tendency to foreground museological processes, numerous exhibitions and publications have discussed and described how archaeological materials are conserved. For the most part, these works have addressed technical issues of preserving objects from deleterious chemical changes and inhibiting inherent vice (Podany & Maish 1993), but a growing number of works have discussed the balance between the preservation of objects on the one hand and natural processes of decay or weathering on the other, which may have been integral to their function within the communities which produced them (Bernstein 1992, Hull-Walski & Flynn 2001). This growing conservation literature details both consultation and compromise between traditional academic forms of conservation and community-based standards of care and treatment, which emphasize the social dimension of archaeological objects (Clavir 2002, Kreps 2003). Literature written by and for indigenous groups and tribal museums has also begun to address museological conservation, object handling protocols, and collections management issues (see articles in Ogden 2004).

A broad and growing literature examines appropriate collections management and curatorial procedures (Buck et al. 2007, Cassar 1995, Fahy 1995, Knell 1994, Simmons 2006), and specific treatments aimed at archaeologists or that examine specific kinds of archaeological remains have appeared (Cassman et al. 2007, Pearce 1990, Sullivan & Childs 2003, Swain 2007). Although these contributions provide guidance regarding conceptual issues and best practices, for the most part they presume that adequate resources in time, space, staff, and funding are available—an enviable position rarely found in practice. Curation of archaeological collections has been described as in a state of crisis since 1982 (Bawaya 2007, Marquardt et al. 1982, Thompson 1999, Trimble & Marino 2003; see also Owen 1999 for a critique of the role of museums in fieldwork), with few immediate prospects for relief in sight. This crisis, coupled with high rates of site destruction, has led some to ask whether it is ethical to excavate new sites if extant museum collections are sufficient to address a given research question (Barker 2003).

**TITLE AND CULTURAL PROPERTY ISSUES**

Another central challenge facing archaeological museums in the twenty-first century involves the question of title to cultural objects (Messenger 1989). Traditionally, the process of accessioning objects intrinsically involved an assertion of title, an approach deeply rooted in Lockean notions of private property and ownership (Malaro 1998). Changing legal and ethical frameworks have problematized these assumptions, however. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) (McKeown et al. 1998, McLaughlin 2004, Trope & Echo-Hawk...
challenged both the right of museums to hold certain categories of objects and whether goodness of title could be asserted for objects acquired from groups where individual ownership—and hence the ability of an individual to convey good title—could not be assumed. The development of the so-called McClain doctrine, which allows foreign countries from whom objects have been looted to seek damages in U.S. courts under the National Stolen Property Act under certain circumstances, has also problematized the degree to which museums can assert good title to objects for which full provenance cannot be established. The McClain doctrine holds that antiquities whose ownership is clearly vested in foreign governments may be stolen property if they were excavated illegally and removed without appropriate permissions; for the doctrine to apply, the antiquities must have been recovered within the borders of the nation-state bringing action, the antiquities laws vesting ownership in the state must be sufficiently clear to give notice to U.S. citizens that removal of antiquities is illegal, and finally the antiquities must have been excavated or removed after the effective date of the statutes vesting ownership in the state (Gerstenblith 2004, Yasaitis 2005).

Although the McClain doctrine, NAGPRA, and related legal precepts provide legal foundations for various kinds of claims, many instances of restitution to foreign governments are based less on litigation than on leverage. The well-publicized case of the Euphronios krater is one example. The Metropolitan Museum purchased the vessel in 1972 for what was then a record sum, giving it pride of place in its galleries as expressing a crucial moment in the development of representational art. The Italian government had long sought its return, claiming the vase had been looted from the Greppe Sant’Angelo near Cerveteri, Italy, within a year or so of its purchase. In 2006, the Metropolitan agreed to return the Euphronios krater and several other contested objects to Italy in return for a series of long-term loans of comparable objects (Watson & Todeschini 2006). The threat of litigation and continued negative publicity led the Metropolitan’s leadership to decide a negotiated settlement was preferable to establishing an unpalatable precedent (Waxman 2008). Other museums have resisted calls for the return of putatively stolen objects. Egypt claims that a funerary mask of Ka Nefer Nefer was stolen from one of its store rooms and purchased by the St. Louis Art Museum, but despite the apparent presence of the item in a 1953 Egyptian inventory the Museum has, to date, declined calls for the mask’s return.

Applicable ethical guidelines under which museums acquire antiquities have undergone significant changes in recent years. Through the 1990s, the primary requirements were that objects not be illegally acquired or have been imported illegally into the country in which the museum is located. Particularly for U.S.-based museums, this ethical standard set a relatively low bar because export restrictions and foreign patrimony laws were generally not observed in determining the legality of import of objects. In 2004, the Association of Art Museum Directors (an organization representing the 200 largest art museums in the United States, Canada, and Mexico) introduced guidelines that recommended museums not acquire objects that could not be shown to have left their source countries at least 10 years before acquisition by the museum (AAMD 2004). These guidelines were widely criticized by a number of archaeological groups, including the Archaeological Institute of America, the Council for Museum Anthropology, the Society for American Archaeology, and the Archaeology Division of the American Anthropological Association as providing a blueprint for the allowable sale of looted antiquities rather than restricting their trade. These organizations instead called on museums to require that antiquities be shown to have left their country of probable origin prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Illegal Sale and Trafficking in Cultural Objects or be accompanied by documentation showing that they had been legally imported into the United States and legally exported from their country of origin. In 2008, the American
Association of Museums recommended new guidelines for American museums in general, which required transparency in acquisitions guidelines, research on provenance of newly acquired objects, and determination that objects had left their country of probable origin prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention date (AAM 2008). The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) revised its standards as well, allowing more room for interpretation than the American Association of Museums (AAM) but similarly adopting the fixed 1970 date for provenance of antiquities and establishing a Web-based registry for listing of artifacts with potentially problematic provenance (AAMD 2008).

The use of Web-based information registries for objects of this kind is not new. In 2000, AAM and AAMD had developed and launched the Nazi Era Provenance Internet Portal in consultation with the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States (PCHA) to provide information to potential claimants of objects in U.S. museums that changed hands in continental Europe between 1933–1945, along with detailed procedures for conducting provenance research on such objects (Yeide et al. 2001).

These represent only some of the challenges to the right of museums to hold good title to particular objects or kinds of cultural property. Hutt (2004) has identified six perspectives on objects from the past, which inform and inflect both legal cases and public debate regarding cultural property claims. Moralist perspectives generally use normative rather than legal language to argue for a particular position perceived as the right or honorable resolution to a contested claim. Nationalist perspectives hold that cultural property is inalienable, hence an entity accepting a nation’s patrimony can never hold good title. Internationalist perspectives, which she alternatively names “paternalist theory,” argue just the opposite, that significant objects of cultural property transcend nationalist laws and are the common property of humankind, and those who can control them should. Property law perspectives focus on identifying who among competing claimants has the right of ownership, regardless of other moral or scientific claims. Scientific perspectives appeal to the public benefit of inquiry and the loss of knowledge by all if inquiries are prevented. The market theory perspective focuses on private property interests and the promotion of free trade in objects and emphasizes mechanisms that permit goodness of title to be restored to objects to facilitate their exchange.

While Hutt’s (2004) identification of different perspectives is a useful heuristic vehicle, the perspectives reflect a particular viewpoint or bias with which many theorists and legal scholars might take issue, notably the premise that native claimants are prima facie rightful owners of cultural property under common law, that patrimonial rights and property law perspectives are the same (common law would generally view property rights as a more complex and separable bundle of rights allowing no such sweeping generalizations), and that nationalist perspectives hold that cultural property is inalienable, rather than the more limited claim that national laws vesting ownership of antiquities in the nation-state should be internationally respected. She presents an intriguing diagram (2004, p. 31) showing possible relationships between the various perspectives and notes that the scientific perspective might be able to establish the validity of nationalist claims, but she does not suggest that scientific analysis could similarly warrant the validity of patrimonial claims by putative descendants.

Increasing rates of site destruction and a series of high-profile restitution cases have intensified debates over the role of the antiquities trade, licit and illicit, in looting, site destruction, and loss of cultural heritage (Atwood 2004, Bogdanos & Patrick 2005, Carman 2005, Renfrew 2006, Watson & Todeschini 2006, Waxman 2008). For some, the role of looting and the illicit (and sometimes legal) trade in antiquities is plain (Brodie et al. 2001), whereas others see such criticisms as a direct or indirect attack on private collecting (Fitz Gibbon 2005).
Just as individual scholars find themselves caught between ethical prohibitions against publication of unprovenanced material on the one hand and the loss of information from such materials on the other (e.g., Owen 2005), some museum staff feel caught between the ethical prohibition against accepting unprovenanced antiquities and the loss of these objects to the private market. These concerns have been most widely voiced by advocates of so-called encyclopedic art museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the British Museum in London, and the Art Institute in Chicago (Cuno 2008, 2009). Apologists for encyclopedic museums cast the antiquities debate as pitting archaeologists against museums (e.g., Watt 2009), although much of the debate really centers on whether archaeological contexts have significant value in art museum contexts, a debate less between archaeologists and museums than between disciplinary emphases on different kinds of contexts within different kinds of museums. Art historians emphasize assigned or assumed contexts based on extrinsic classification of the object (e.g., Boardman 2009), whereas archaeologists focus on observed contexts that allow the validity of extrinsic classifications to be assessed (Barker 2004). The former view privileges the authority of the museum or museum curator, whereas the latter decenters that privileged position by allowing significance to be determined through multiple kinds of contexts (archaeological, aesthetic, pedagogical patrimonial, etc.), which may be assigned by different entities or individuals.

PROSPECTS

McLean (1999) has succinctly depicted the terrain in which archaeological museums now operate: “Our times seem to be framed by an increasingly complex and layered dialectic of privilege, expert knowledge, and prescriptive meaning-making on the one hand, and access, popular culture, and the negotiation of meaning on the other” (p. 103). To this might be added a decentering of the privileged place museums have held as keepers of cultural property and myriad economic and governance challenges. To some, this perspective suggests a bleak future.

But although the terrain may be difficult, it should seem familiar. The tension between the dual aspects of the museum—responsible for both holding collections and making them available for its publics—has always lain at the heart of the museum enterprise. Museums are at once sacred groves and public attractions (Jeffers 2003), consecrated as temples to the Muses on the one hand and committed to service as a public forum on the other. Like our understandings of the past and our needs as a diverse and disparate society, museums will continue to change. That is and will continue to be their nature, suggesting a bright rather than bleak future for the keepers of the past.

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