

Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: The tangled stories of things

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Abstract

This paper discusses the contribution of the 2003 ‘Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums’ to the debate on repatriation. The ‘Universalist’ approach taken by the Declaration is first considered, noting the implications of its emphasis on art, the heritage of museums and objects, along with its focus on the sculpture of ancient Greece and the enlightenment origin of museums such as the British Museum. It is argued that it reveals an essentialist approach that derives from a particular Western perspective, rather than being truly ‘universal’, and then considers whether a similar problem underlies many of the arguments advocating repatriation. The second part of the paper explores the opportunities offered by an approach which emphasises the ‘biography of objects’. This demonstrates how the tangled histories of objects and their many meanings can be considered. Repatriation is shown to be able to result in an increase in knowledge and understanding, rather than its destruction, and so meets the declared aim of the Declaration to ‘foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation’.

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1. Introduction

Repatriation has become a very important issue for museums today, with perhaps the most famous cases being the request for the repatriation of the Parthenon marbles to Athens and those in which indigenous people have requested the return of the remains of their ancestors

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and sacred items. Some requests, such as the repatriation of human remains in the USA,¹ are governed by legislation, which compels museums to repatriate. In other cases, the responsibility for making a decision lies with the governing body of a museum. This paper argues that the ideas lying behind the debate are much more complex and subtle than is sometimes recognised. When faced with requests for the repatriation of items, museums need to reflect on the changing and conflicting ideas of what is considered appropriate to collect, and how the histories of museums and collecting have created the specific circumstances within which museums operate today.

Much of the published discussion about repatriation has been written by its advocates, or outlines the procedures that should be followed when responding to a request (e.g. Legget, 2000). Perhaps the most significant exception has been the 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums' (Section 9), issued by a group of major museums in Europe and the USA in November 2002. This paper explores the ideas embedded within the Declaration in an attempt to understand an important aspect of the debate about the role of museums. It initially considers the 'Universalist' approach, arguing that it reveals an essentialist approach which is shared by many who advocate repatriation, before exploring the opportunities offered by an approach which emphasises the 'biography of objects'.

2. Museums and universalist thinking

One of the striking features of the Declaration is its claim that museums with geographically diverse collections could be 'universal' and so offer a more insightful perspective on objects than would be possible if objects were only displayed with material from a museum's locality. An approach that claims an ideology-free objective viewpoint is common to much museum practice, not just that of the Declaration's signatories. It is encountered in the classification schemes by which collections are documented, the frequent separation of displays of 'art' from 'natural history' and 'human history' and the networks of subject specialist curators. The latter have been highlighted in the United Kingdom's (UK) Museums Association (2005) *Collections for the Future* enquiry, which focused on the importance of 'subject-based networks' of museum experts to 'improve the care and interpretation of collections' (Museums Association, 2005: p. 9). This emphasises the importance of Western academic subject classifications in discussions about museums, which have also included proposals for 'planned collection' and 'rationalising collections' (Museums Association, 2005). While collecting policies and deaccessioning can help to create collections that are viable and useful (e.g. Ainslie, 1999), the danger is that the terms recall those of the Declaration in their apparent neutrality and could pose a threat if the same aims were applied to all museums. Some of the most interesting museums are those that have idiosyncratic collections.

The current discussion about the treatment of human remains by museums is an example of the attempt to categorise museum objects (Curtis, 2003). Attempts to define what this category includes are always problematic: should hair, prostheses, blood-stained clothes or grave goods be included? At the same time, things thought to have personhood by some people, such as sacred objects, pets or children's soft toys, are usually excluded. Despite originating in a desire

¹ The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) 1990 covers human remains, funerary objects and sacred objects. It extends only to museums funded by the federal government of the USA, except the Smithsonian Institute, which has its own legislation.

to accord respect to indigenous people, the determination of museums to establish a definition of ‘human remains’ (e.g. DCMS, 2005: p. 9) shows a dominance of Western thinking that is remarkably similar to the approach taken by the Declaration.

The language of much professional museum thinking therefore reflects the dominance of a particular way of looking at the world that is a product of 18th and 19th century academic thought, with its origins in essentialism. An essentialist approach ‘views the established beliefs and institutions of our modern heritage as not only real but true, and not only true but good’ (Brameld, 1950 quoted in OED, 2005). Unfortunately for those taking this approach, there are many different ways to understand objects, such as the origins of raw material discovered by elemental analysis, the sacred meanings accessible only to initiates, the identification of stylistic features adopted from other cultural traditions, and the study of the role of objects in power relations. All of them can bring different understandings: none has a monopoly on the truth.

2.1. *The Declaration*

When the ‘Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums’ was issued in 2002, the most high profile repatriation request was by the Greek Government for the return of the Parthenon marbles from the British Museum to Athens in time for the 2004 Olympics. Rather than focusing on that request, the statement emphasised ‘the importance of the context which a great museum offers’ (Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, quoted in Bailey, 2002) and involved nineteen major museums. It has not been clear whether the British Museum was actually one of the signatories (Museums Journal, 2003: p. 14); with it appearing in some texts (e.g. British Museum, 2003) and not in others (e.g. Cleveland Museum of Art, 2003). Nonetheless, it is clear that the British Museum supported the Declaration, with Neil MacGregor saying ‘This declaration is an unprecedented statement of common value and purpose issued by the directors of some of the world’s leading museums and galleries. The diminishing of collections such as these would be a great loss to the world’s cultural heritage’ (British Museum, 2003).

While the Declaration makes many points, one of its aims—resisting claims to repatriate objects from museums—drew immediate critical comment. Even UNESCO was critical of the Declaration, reporting the statement by the International Council on Museums (ICOM), that ‘repatriation of objects is an issue that should be very carefully dealt with. Wise and thoughtful judgment is necessary. Unnecessarily strong judgments or declarations should in any case be avoided’ (UNESCO, 2003: p. 3). Maurice Davies, Deputy Director of the UK’s Museums Association described it as ‘a very crude statement that doesn’t give credit to the subtlety of thought that many museums give this issue’ (Morris, 2003: p. 8). Despite the only specific reference in the Declaration being to classical Greek sculpture, the link between repatriation and indigenous rights was highlighted by many reports, such as that by the Sydney Morning Herald which titled an article ‘Top museums unite to fight Aboriginal claims’ (Fray & Moses, 2002).

The Declaration is an eloquent document that encapsulates an important strand of contemporary museological thinking. As well as its explicit messages, the language of the Declaration also reveals the ways in which the roles of museums were seen by its signatories. This goes far beyond resisting repatriation requests, to the articulation of a rationale for major cross-cultural collections and exhibitions in museums.

The appreciation of objects as ‘art’ is highlighted throughout the Declaration. This is most clearly seen in the list of signatory museums, most of which are museums of art, rather than archaeology or anthropology, let alone science. It is also notable that only a few months before the Declaration was issued, Neil MacGregor had been appointed to the British Museum, having been

Director of the National Gallery in London. The emphasis on objects as ‘art’ is shown by the use of adjectives such as ‘artistic’ and ‘aesthetic’ when describing items in museums. While perhaps unintended, the frequent use of metaphors of light and vision is also a striking feature of the Declaration. Examples include ‘reflective’, ‘viewed in the light’, ‘illustration’ and ‘focus’, reflecting the importance of visual approaches in Western culture. Although the appreciation of objects as art can bring many insights, particularly into those objects created within the Western artistic tradition, it is a very specific viewpoint. As Gell (1998: p. 3) wrote, ‘I think that the desire to see the art of other cultures aesthetically tells us more about our own ideology and its quasi-religious veneration of art objects as aesthetic talismans, than it does about these other cultures’. For example, a beaded crown worn by the Elepe of Epe is displayed as an example of African art in the African gallery of the British Museum, revealing nothing about how it was confiscated by the Governor of Lagos, Sir William MacGregor, in 1903 and allocated to the British Museum as Crown property. The records of the confiscation ‘illuminate the subversion of Yoruba ritual values and their appropriation by a liberal-minded governor for colonial, capitalist ends’ (Hunt, 1991: p. 177). Similarly, the display of Benin bronzes in the same gallery pays little attention to the controversies surrounding claims for their repatriation that reveal much about both 19th and 21st century Africa and its encounters with Western culture. In the same way that ‘archaeology and anthropology are the outcomes of colonialism’ (Gosden, 1999: p. 16), it is not surprising that many people saw the Declaration, with its emphasis on art, as a successor to exploitative colonialism.

While the word ‘heritage’ occurs only once in the Declaration, the idea of valuable objects that have been inherited from past generations occurs frequently. What is striking, however, is that the examples given are not drawn from 19th century ethnographic collections, nor the archaeology of medieval Europe, but from ‘classical Greece’ and ‘ancient civilizations’. The reasons for this emphasis on classical Greece and its importance to modern Western culture were highlighted at the beginning of this paper and will be discussed further below. Beyond the specific example of ancient Greek sculpture, it is the history of museums themselves that is emphasised as an important heritage, through the discussion of ‘the objects and monumental works that were installed decades or even centuries ago in museums throughout Europe and America’ or ‘the centuries-long history of appreciation of Greek art’.

Objects, rather than the non-material aspects of life are, of course, emphasised in the Declaration (such as ‘archaeological, artistic and ethnic objects’, ‘objects’ and ‘monumental works’, ‘artifacts’ (sic) and ‘sculpture’), and their acquisition by museums as a formal and permanent act, such as ‘acquired’, ‘installed’, ‘part of museum collections’ as well as ‘purchase, gift, or partage’. The latter word, ‘partage’, presumably refers to the division of archaeological assemblages among museums that contributed to the costs of excavation. It is more striking that other forms of acquisition, such as war loot or theft are not mentioned, despite the number of items which have been acquired in this way. Indeed, discussion of questionable acquisitions is avoided by the statement that ‘objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era’ and the apparent neutrality of the description of objects being ‘displaced from their original source’.

In combination, this emphasis on art, the history of museums, and objects demonstrates the way in which many museums see their collections. While they resist considering their collections as commodities that can be bought and sold, at the same time they rely on the rights accorded by property law to resist claims to remove items from their collections. This tension is seen clearly in the UK Museums Association’s definition of museums, which states that ‘they hold [collections] in trust for society’ (Museums Association, 2002: p. 1). Rather than being a valid statement of legal title, this is actually an ethical statement and professional guideline.

With all its signatories coming from Europe and North America, one of the obvious criticisms of the Declaration is its failure to address the needs of people in the rest of the world. A response by MacGregor and Williams (2005) to a previous critique of the Declaration (Curtis, 2005a) tries to answer this by highlighting the wide range of loan exhibitions created by the British Museum throughout the world, as well as by partnerships with national museums in a number of African and Asian countries. These exhibitions are of two types: those that temporarily repatriate objects from the British Museum (such as the loan of East African objects to Kenya) and those that compare two civilisations (such as the loan of Mesopotamian objects to Mexico City or Beijing). The former approach actually undermines the argument for ‘universal’ comparative exhibitions, while the latter emphasises the primacy of ‘great civilisations’ in museums, rather than offering an alternative approach to interpretation. The implications of this will be pursued below.

2.2. Ancient Greece and the enlightenment origin of museums

There has been less discussion about the suggestion in the Declaration that the Enlightenment ideals of the foundation of the British Museum are relevant for museums today. Responding to a critique of the Declaration (Curtis, 2005a), MacGregor and Williams (2005: p. 59) have argued that ‘the British Museum, and other museums like it, at their best embody the enlightenment belief that we can all talk about, and to, one another across our cultural boundaries: that we need to find new, and better, ways of doing so than hitherto; and that if we do, we shall discover how much unities us’. As well as the claim that such museums are ‘a universal resource for the citizens of the world’ (MacGregor and Williams, 2005), this position is based on the premise that museum practices deriving from an enlightenment ideal can escape the cultural constraints of the 18th century.

Who is the ‘international public’ for whom these museum collections are available? If they are the descendants of the members of the 18th century Republic of Letters for whom the British Museum was established, they may indeed now be worldwide (MacGregor & Williams, 2005). They are, however, still a restricted community whose shared values include an interest in the products of classical Greece and other ancient civilisations. Indeed, only if the European enlightenment tradition is seen as the apogee of human culture is it possible to see ancient Greek sculpture as being of significance to ‘mankind as a whole’. There are plenty of people in the world to whom ancient Greek sculpture is unimportant, other than perhaps as a symbol for the power of Euro-American culture.

It is this elision of Western elite culture with ideas of the universal that is the most perturbing aspect of the Declaration. The history by which Greek sculpture came to have the high value accorded it is rich, complex and specific, with its origins in the European Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. As Rietbergen puts it (1998: p. 180), ‘the renewed acquaintance with classical culture was intensified greatly when many members of the cultural elite of the Byzantine Empire fled the Balkans and ancient Greece in the face of the Turkish threat’. The origins of the modern museum have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill, 1992), but three important points need emphasis: the role of classical antiquities in the development of modern European identity, the sense of a threat from Turkish and Islamic civilisation, and the role of museums in structuring and presenting the knowledge that supports that identity. In a similar way to the links developed between Renaissance Europe and the Classical past, the heritage of Ancient Greece grew in importance from the 18th century until today when ‘antiquity plays a central role in modern Greek society’ (Hamilakis, 2000: p. 57). It is also worth noting the tension that, in both 15th century Europe and 19th century Greece,

opposition to Islamic civilisation has often been a key factor in the recognition of the importance of the classical past, despite the role of medieval Islamic culture in preserving the writings of classical Greece.

3. The lives of objects

Many museums, including the British Museum in its exhibition gallery ‘Enlightenment: Discovering the world in the 18th century’ (Pes, 2004), now consider the history of their collections in exhibitions. Likewise, much academic writing focuses on the history of collecting, while the ‘biographical’ approach to the ‘social life of things’ has become very significant (e.g. Appadurai, 1986; Hoskins, 1998). This approach highlights the ways in which objects were exchanged and collected, and how their meanings are contingent on context, will change over time and may be contradictory.

Comparative exhibitions of the type praised in the Declaration can offer an interesting context for displaying objects, though they reduce the meanings to those that fit within the theme of the exhibition rather than opening up other possibilities. For example, the idea expressed in the Declaration that ‘the distinctly Greek aesthetic of (Greek sculpture) appears all the more strongly as the result of their being seen and studied in direct proximity to products of other great civilizations’, explains neither the connections between ancient Greece and the rest of prehistoric Europe, nor the historical and cultural contexts of ancient Greece within which the sculpture was created. Instead, only those meanings consistent with the idea of what makes a ‘great civilisation’ will be discussed, making it difficult for visitors to suggest an alternative narrative. It is important that, as well as exhibitions that highlight the range of meanings explored in the Declaration, there are others that explore different aspects.

An example of the potential for richer interpretation is shown by an analysis of a red figure *kylix* (wine drinking cup) in Marischal Museum. It depicts a group of young men drinking at a *symposion*, with their property depicted in black. Alongside shoes and pots is a black slave. This is particularly striking; even more so when it is realised that the 19th century collector, Alexander Henderson, derived his wealth from a plantation in Jamaica (Pennington, 2004) and would have known the black ‘servant’ his father was famous for having in his Aberdeenshire home. Henderson’s enlightenment interest in ancient Greece cannot be separated from his interest in wine (he wrote a well-regarded history of wine) or his dependence on slavery. This cup therefore demonstrates the role of classical Greek art in the self-conception of Western elites and the formation of museums. It is also a reminder that the enlightenment origins of museums took place at a time when owning slaves could be as acceptable as owning a collection of antiquities. As well its humanistic ideals, the enlightenment was a period of slave owning, plunder and inequality, while ‘free enquiry’ was an ideal rather than a reality. Museums need to deal with contemporary cultural concerns and ethics, not those of the enlightenment shorn of its darker context.

3.1. Repatriation

The repatriation of a headdress from Marischal Museum to the Kainai/Blood Tribe Horn Society in 2003 (Curtis, 2005b) also reveals the richness of the biographical approach for museum interpretation. The outcome of this request, the return of the headdress to its role as part of a sacred bundle, was based on a comparison of the importance of the headdress to the Kainai people and to the museum, rather than on a belief that one set of meanings was invalid. Indeed,

the people now caring for the headdress continue to be interested in its history and the links the repatriation has created with Aberdeen, while Marischal Museum now has substantially more knowledge about the headdress and Kainai culture. It was also able to mount an exhibition ‘Going home: museums and repatriation’ which explored the story of this and other repatriation requests. One visitor commented that they were ‘so glad to see this as a discussion—I knew very little about procedures and cases of repatriation’, while another said that the exhibition showed that ‘all of humanity is connected to each other’. The latter makes an interesting contrast with the ideals of the Declaration, emphasising that repatriation can lead to an increase in knowledge and understanding, rather than its destruction.

The risk is that the arguments taken by many of the advocates of repatriation and the rights of ‘source communities’ (e.g. in Peers & Brown, 2003) do not escape an essentialist approach. Instead, the way that ‘source communities’ are understood can be as much a product of Western culture as is the idea of the ‘universal museum’. There are two ways in which this happens. First, when we talk of ‘indigenous people’ or ‘source communities’ we are contrasting them with Western culture. The danger of doing this is that the differences between these cultures are minimised—homogenising them into an undifferentiated ‘other’. Second, the power of Western culture is such that indigenous people have to deal with us on our terms. Ingold (2000) has shown how the ways in which Western notions of what it is to be ‘indigenous’ are rooted in a model that emphasises linear *descent* from an ancestral population in a particular place. This is quite unlike the way that many indigenous people have traditionally considered their relationship to a place, being a result of their *lived experiences* of their environment. As people articulate their claims for land or objects now in Western hands, they are forced to do so in ways that may be unlike their traditional beliefs, ultimately affecting their own view of themselves. The historical relationships between the people from whom something was collected and those who are claiming it today may be very complex and ambivalent, while the ‘source community’ may not be a harmonious, bounded ethnic group. This does not mean that objects should not be repatriated, but that these are issues must be confronted and discussed before meanings can be properly considered.

3.2. *What is a museum object?*

Museum collections ideally consist of thousands of objects, each individually catalogued and numbered. As well as being a practical means by which objects and associated information can be related, the writing of numbers on museum objects also symbolises their transfer from being part of life or ‘souvenirs’ to being part of a ‘collection’ (Stewart, 1993). They thus become ‘specimens’ in which their principle meaning is to represent a classification system (Pearce, 1992). Although this view of museum objects has now been challenged by critiques that recognise the multiple meanings of objects, much museum terminology and practice is dominated by the traditional view. In this paper, the description of something as a ‘museum object’ is therefore only an indication of one of the contexts in which something has been considered. It does not mean that there is an essential category of ‘museum objects’ that can be distinguished from anything else. Only its treatment as a museum object makes it one.

An alternative approach has tried to develop a compromise between indigenous traditions and museum practice in museums or ‘keeping places’ (e.g. Kreps, 2003). For example, the Museums Australia document *Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities* (2005) highlights the importance of ‘custodianship and care taking rather than ownership’, and

a ‘recognition of the value of stories and other intangibles associated with objects’ (Kreps, 2004: p. 7). As a result of this shift in understanding at the National Museum of Australia, ‘any research undertaken on ancestral remains held on behalf of communities must have the prior consent of traditional custodians or those authorised by them’ as well as from the museum (National Museum of Australia, 2005: p. 4).

As discussed above, this approach is only possible where a particular community is identified as having overriding rights to determine the treatment of material. It is therefore not surprising that museums such as the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, the National Museum of Australia and Te Papa/Museum of New Zealand have been at the forefront of this approach. As well as controlling access to sensitive material and recognising different treatments, this bicultural approach can result in very effective exhibitions that give an ‘insider’s’ view of culture, such as the exhibition *Nitsitapiisini: the Story of the Blackfoot People* in the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta (The Blackfoot Gallery Committee, 2001; Conaty, 2003).

In relying on a shared view of material by a local community and a museum, however, this approach has many similarities with conventional practice in Western social history museums. We also need to acknowledge the different local communities that have a claim on material. For example, the family of Frederick Bowie, who made a collection in Vanuatu at the turn of the 20th century, continue to have close links with the museum. These links have recently included the collector’s nephew celebrating his 80th birthday in the museum, as well as other family members making contact with each other through the museum and donating family mementos to the museum. It is worth remembering that the collecting practices of museums have never been comprehensive: many objects have not been collected because they have been seen as unpleasant, worthless or too valuable. Likewise, collecting practices have changed, with many museums now collecting material that would not have been collected a couple of generations ago, such as items associated with the lives of industrial workers.

4. Conclusion

Museums that care for material from many different cultural origins have a major challenge. How can they reconcile a responsibility to their audiences, to source communities and to universal ideals of scholarship? Four approaches appear to be possible, noting that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive:

- (a) Adopt the ‘keeping place’ approach, dividing their collections into groups each with access controlled by representatives of that cultural group. While this may be appropriate for museums located close to the ‘source community’, it will restrict access to museum visitors by policy and source community members by geography. It is therefore a rather negative compromise that will neither satisfy the Western belief in providing access and freedom of information, nor the demands of indigenous people to control material of importance to them.
- (b) Divide their collections into categories, such as human remains or objects only to be handled by men, each with distinct treatments. This approach is becoming popular, particularly with regard to human remains (e.g. Working Group on Human Remains, 2003). As discussed above, however, it can be based on an essentialist classificatory approach that will restrict access for exhibition and scholarship without recognising the more fundamental challenge to the meanings of material.

- (c) Adopt the ‘universal museum’ approach that places all authority with the museum and that rejects repatriation. Although this will enable museums to ‘talk about, and to, one another across our cultural boundaries’ (MacGregor & Williams, 2005: p. 59), such talk will ignore the voices of people who do not share the view of ‘museum objects’ outlined above, and will fail fully to engage with the post-colonial critique of the role of museums.
- (d) Take a case-by-case approach that will highlight the multiple meanings of objects, but that would accept repatriation if retention by the museum would cause deep offence.

Whatever a museum decides to do, it is important that it recognises that there are certain aspects of people’s lives that are not appropriate for display or treatment as museum objects, but will consider all other material to be appropriate for exploring the connections between people. Museums need to have a subtler understanding of their history, how they are perceived and their role in society when making such decisions.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is recognising that what we take to be ‘rational’ or ‘universal’ is a product of our own culture rather than being essential concepts. By understanding museums in this way (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992), and by engaging with the different views of the world offered by repatriation requests rather than expecting them to fit within Western conceptions of ‘indigenous’ beliefs, museums can play an important part in offering a deeper understanding of other cultures and our own.

Museums need to reflect more on the tangled histories of their collections and the many voices that deserve to be heard. This can include exhibitions about museum practice, such as the British Museum’s ‘Enlightenment’ exhibition or the popular exhibitions about repatriation in Glasgow and Aberdeen, to reveal the uncertainties and conflicts of museum practice. This approach also involves a closer appreciation of the specifics of particular objects and their multiple meanings in documentation, exhibition planning and the consideration of requests to restrict access or to repatriate items. The Declaration is surely right in its desire that museums should ‘foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation’, but this needs to focus on the historical and contemporary connections offered by collections and the opportunities offered by repatriation, not the retreat into essentialism suggested by the Declaration and much of its opposition.

5. Note

5.1. *Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums*

The international museum community shares the conviction that illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects must be firmly discouraged. We should, however, recognize that objects acquired in earlier times must be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era. The objects and monumental works that were installed decades and even centuries ago in museums throughout Europe and America were acquired under conditions that are not comparable with current ones.

Over time, objects so acquired—whether by purchase, gift, or partage—have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them. Today we are especially sensitive to the subject of a work’s original context, but we should not lose sight of the fact that museums too provide a valid and valuable context for objects that were long ago displaced from their original source.

The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an

international public in major museums. Indeed, the sculpture of classical Greece, to take but one example, is an excellent illustration of this point and of the importance of public collecting. The centuries-long history of appreciation of Greek art began in antiquity, was renewed in Renaissance Italy, and subsequently spread through the rest of Europe and to the Americas. Its accession into the collections of public museums throughout the world marked the significance of Greek sculpture for mankind as a whole and its enduring value for the contemporary world. Moreover, the distinctly Greek aesthetic of these works appears all the more strongly as the result of their being seen and studied in direct proximity to products of other great civilizations.

Calls to repatriate objects that have belonged to museum collections for many years have become an important issue for museums. Although each case has to be judged individually, we should acknowledge that museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation. Museums are agents in the development of culture, whose mission is to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation. Each object contributes to that process. To narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted would therefore be a disservice to all visitors.

Signed by the Directors of:

The Art Institute of Chicago; Bavarian State Museum, Munich (Alte Pinakothek, Neue Pinakothek); State Museums, Berlin; Cleveland Museum of Art; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Louvre Museum, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Florence; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Prado Museum, Madrid; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The British Museum.

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