

Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities.
2009 James Cuno (Editor)
Oxford Princeton University Press

This book was inspired by a conference held in 2006 called “Museums and the collecting of Antiquities: past, present and future” and is a discussion on the controversial legislation regarding the acquisition of antiquities. Cuno from the Art Institute of Chicago summarises the argument, outlining the museums’ and the archaeologists’ viewpoint. He ascertains that archaeologists are fixated on archaeological context, seeing no value in “orphan” objects whereas he emphasises that museums see the value in all objects and will continue to buy them even though archaeologists believe this actively encourages looting and selling of antiquities on the Black Market. He admits that some of the articles are confrontational in their approach and indeed, that was how some of the articles including Cuno’s introduction came across, with named archaeologists being personally attacked. The chapter by Boardman for example, was a personal attack on Colin Renfrew and the discipline of archaeology itself which he described as “arrogant”. His chapter was a barrage of abuse against the legislation in place to prevent stolen objects being bought by collectors and museums, as well as the archaeologists who support it, with the rather bold statement “If current legislation is truly effective, anyone anywhere who now comes on a hoard of coins or Roman silver will do best simply to melt them down”

The arguments presented throughout the book, are not so much varied, as they are all from a pro-collector point of view, but rather their approaches to this argument which differ. For example, Cuno discusses how museums actively preserve culture although he rather controversially claims that most nationalistic claims to return objects are unfounded as often they are not the direct descendants of the ancient cultures they claim to represent. This is also discussed by Kwame who uses Nigeria as an example. The ancient civilisation was not Nigerian as this is a new political nation. He doesn’t think they have the cultural rights simply because of boundaries. He also commented that all art belongs to world culture and therefore it is good for objects to be in foreign museums so more people can appreciate them. Rather than simply asking for objects to be returned why not ask for objects from other cultures too for their own museums, which is an interesting approach.

Macgregor discusses the British Museum and their vision of giving a global view of the world showing visitors that people all over the world think and behave in different ways. He also discusses the role the British Museum has played with exhibitions which can deflect from the political issues in the news about a specific country, by showing a different side. Instead of focusing on the Sudanese genocide, for example, they focussed on their historical rituals and multi-cultural history, diverting the attention from the negatives. De Montebello continues the argument of encyclopaedic museums, and how museums have to display a culture to the best advantage, borrowing artefacts when needed from other museums. He makes a valid point that whilst archaeological context is important it is only the “last context” before entering a collection and as long as it is recorded and published it is acceptable to use the object to educate. Watt emphasises that whilst archaeological context is important its value is increased the further back in time you go – with the conclusion being that for pre-historic sites archaeological context is invaluable but in historic sites the written record is more so.

Brown discusses the conflict that can be found in encyclopaedic museums, especially where the culture of indigenous communities are displayed and presented using the Musée du quai Branly as an example where the indigenous art of Africa, Oceania and the new World is separated from the European art. It has been dubbed colonial, and Brown stated they would have been better to return the artwork to the original owners. The consultation with indigenous groups is actively encouraged now when displaying their heritage, with their moral rights being presented.

Macgregor argues that all works have both an historical and an aesthetic context, the latter of which he does not view as the least important. He made it clear that although he sees value in unprovenanced objects, and he lists a number of them, he does not condone unlawful acquisition of objects. I was somewhat surprised at the rather dubious statement, however, that “museums don’t hoard”, claiming everything they buy whether provenanced or not is published and displayed. One wonders if the Metropolitan Museum of Art has no stores, like the British Museum, Petrie Museum, or even the Cairo Museum. He asks the question of what would happen to the objects should museums refuse to buy them, concluding it is better to buy unprovenanced works of art than let them disappear.

Both Boardman and Owen take this argument further, and claim the legislation in place essentially censors knowledge and scholarship as some publications will not publish articles and research based on objects of dubious acquisition. Both authors feel it is essential for all sites and artefacts to be published enabling, scholars, museums and the public have the information available to learn more about the past. Boardman criticises many archaeologists for not publishing quickly or fully the sites that are excavated believing this to be more damaging to historical knowledge than unprovenanced artefacts.

A book of this type would not be complete without the obligatory discussion of the Elgin/Parthenon marbles and the Bamiyan Buddahs. Boardman presents somewhat contentious views on the destruction of the Buddahs, by stating the actions of the Taliban was led by religion and was no worse or unacceptable, than other religious damage. He even referred to the Buddahs as “big doll-like figures.....hardly masterpieces of Buddhist art.” Gillman deals with the destruction in a far more sensitive manner, addressing the issue of whose heritage it is; Afghanistan’s, Muslims, Buddhist or world heritage. The Elgin Marbles were presented by Gillman, not as a government against government dispute about national heritage but rather a government against a private organisation (Greece against the British Museum).

Whilst this book was interesting and a valuable addition to the debate regarding unprovenanced objects and their acquisition by museums and collectors, I feel the antagonistic, confrontational approach of some of the authors to be somewhat counterproductive. Some of the authors advocated the ‘archaeologists versus museum’ battlefield leaving the reader feeling they should take sides “you are either with us or against us”; an unusual approach to academic argument. However, some valid points were made, and this book is recommended for those interested in Museum Studies or cultural heritage and the controversies that surround it.