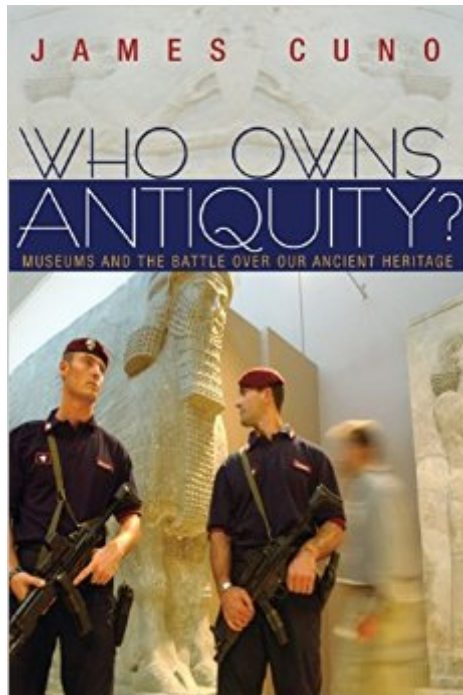


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Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums And The Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage



Synopsis

Whether antiquities should be returned to the countries where they were found is one of the most urgent and controversial issues in the art world today, and it has pitted museums, private collectors, and dealers against source countries, archaeologists, and academics. Maintaining that the acquisition of undocumented antiquities by museums encourages the looting of archaeological sites, countries such as Italy, Greece, Egypt, Turkey, and China have claimed ancient artifacts as state property, called for their return from museums around the world, and passed laws against their future export. But in *Who Owns Antiquity?*, one of the world's leading museum directors vigorously challenges this nationalistic position, arguing that it is damaging and often disingenuous.

"Antiquities," James Cuno argues, "are the cultural property of all humankind," "evidence of the world's ancient past and not that of a particular modern nation. They comprise antiquity, and antiquity knows no borders." Cuno argues that nationalistic retention and reclamation policies impede common access to this common heritage and encourage a dubious and dangerous politicization of antiquities--and of culture itself. Antiquities need to be protected from looting but also from nationalistic identity politics. To do this, Cuno calls for measures to broaden rather than restrict international access to antiquities. He advocates restoration of the system under which source countries would share newly discovered artifacts in exchange for archaeological help, and he argues that museums should again be allowed reasonable ways to acquire undocumented antiquities. Cuno explains how *partage* broadened access to our ancient heritage and helped create national museums in Cairo, Baghdad, and Kabul. The first extended defense of the side of museums in the struggle over antiquities, *Who Owns Antiquity?* is sure to be as important as it is controversial.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

(A version of this review first appeared in the August/September 2008 issue of First Things.) "Hey hey, ho ho. Western culture's got to go!" So went the chants on the campus of Stanford University in 1988, criticizing the classical canon. Well, it's going -- literally. Antiquities of questionable provenance held by many museums are being "repatriated" to their source nations, sometimes as the result of a mere threat. When a claim is made, should museums comply? "The world is divided on this question," explains James Cuno, with "museums, private collectors and art dealers" on one side, and "archaeologists, academics, and source nation cultural ministers" on the other. Cuno defends the museum side of the issue, and he is well suited to make the case. Cuno, once director of the Harvard University Art Museum, is currently director of the Art Institute of Chicago. The hero of Cuno's book is the Enlightenment-inspired "encyclopedic museum," such as the Louvre or the British Museum. The villain is nationalism, which is fortified by recent laws that keep archaeological discoveries within national borders or demand their return. These laws, says Cuno, are an unenforceable "bouillabaisse of good intentions and bureaucratic ambitions," and their "trajectory of retention is tightening, from protection to prevention to return." Cuno's alternative is the legal scholar John Merryman's triad of knowledge, preservation, and access. Museums that best meet such benchmarks should get the goods. The book is packed with informative tangents but will do little to mollify those who suspect Western museums of purchasing or retaining illegally exported antiquities. Because UNESCO resolutions have not prevented looting, Cuno calls them a "failed regime."

While still conspicuously ignorant of the subjects, museum acquisitions, museology in general, and the debates concerning (re)appropriation of "culturally significant objects" all fascinate me. James Cuno manages to cover all these bases in this book whose major question is: Do modern states have the right to demand the return of objects that may be deemed to have cultural, aesthetic, or national value? And if they do, what reasons validate this demand? Cuno's short answer is that states don't have this right at all. Instead, he sees the rise of these cultural reappropriation laws as a way of shoring up nationalist pretensions. His argument seems strong. Two of his chapters, "The Turkish Question" and "The Chinese Question," examine this assertion in detail. For example, when

the Ba'athists took control in Iraq in 1968, they adopted strict laws of cultural appropriation in concert with their virulently nationalist rhetoric. "Their intention was to create a `national-territorial consciousness resting upon the particular history of Iraq and, equally significantly, of what the regime, or a powerful circle within it, presented as the history of the Iraqi people.' Central to this effort was an official drive to foster archaeology as a way of making people aware and proud of `their ancient past,' including that of the pre-Islamic era. At the same time, the Party encouraged local folklore for the purpose of inspiring communities with a sense of internal Iraqi unity, and emphasizing Iraq's uniqueness among the nations of the world at large" (p. 58-59).

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