

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, London

From the British Museum Web site:

www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/newsroom/current2003/universalmuseums.html

The Treasures of World Culture in the Public Museum

by **Peter-Klaus Schuster**

General Director, State Museums of Berlin

In December 2002, a “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums” was signed by leading museums of Europe and North America. Through the Declaration, these museums wished to stress the vital role they play in cultivating a better comprehension of different civilisations and in promoting respect between them. They also stress the need to address claims for restitution on a case by case basis, with attention to the historical and legal circumstances of acquisition.

> On the issue of restitution, is it reprehensible to insist on the examination of each case of acquisition and restitution individually? Of course not, for any claim for unconditional return to the place of origin of a work would be legally questionable and would also show no respect for the history and fate of the object. For example, where and to whom does a Greek Attic vase of the 5th century B.C. belong, which was exported 2,500 years ago from Athens to Etruria, was excavated legally by a Delegation from the Vatican, sold to a Prussian monarch and lastly transferred from the royal collection to the nascent public museum some 170 years ago? Does the vase now belong to Athens, Vulci, Rome or Berlin? Moreover, many priceless objects would have been destroyed had they not been rescued by archaeologists, as is the case with the Pergamon Altar, saved by German archaeologists.

> From the outset, the State Museums of Berlin based their acquisitions on the decisions of a committee of directors (replacing the personal tastes of largely aristocratic individuals), and displayed the arts and cultures of the whole world. This is why the objects in the collections of major museums may be considered to be part of world heritage. Often these objects only gain their notoriety because they have been displayed, in these universal museums, to a wide international audience for hundreds of years.

> The collections in Berlin were acquired through the art market or private commerce. No deal was in fact possible without a contract of sale or permission to export. This does not mean that nothing was sold or exported. But it does mean that all objects came legally into the collections.

> The Directors of the State Museums in West Berlin adopted a Declaration in 1976 which condemned illegal excavations, the concealment of origin and the illegal trade of archaeological objects. It argued for cultural exchange through loans between museums which would respect the requirements of preserving and restoring the works. As a consequence, long-term loan agreements have been introduced between Germany and both Italy and Greece. In 2002, we also prepared a Declaration to the effect that we, as Universal Museums, will not loan out for exhibition any objects of dubious legal background. Our international congress on Illegal Archaeology, planned long before the Declaration on Universal Museums, again denounced unauthorised excavation and illegal art-dealing, and proposed solutions.

> In connection with the demand for the restitution of art works in the possession of our museums, we distinguish four categories of case. Firstly, there are historical art works, which were as a rule purchased legally. Secondly, there is war booty seized on behalf of the State as reparation or as war trophy. This is the case between Germany and Russia. Thirdly, there are cultural possessions acquired as a consequence of persecution – art looted by the Nazis. And lastly, there are stolen goods from illegal excavations and plundering.



> The cases in our second category are governed by the Geneva Convention. National and international property law applies to these cases, as it does to the cases of the third category, art looted by the Nazis. As for the last category, stolen goods from illegal excavations, this is now under discussion in the light of the UNESCO and the UNIDROIT Conventions. That leaves us with the first category, legally acquired historical art works which are now demanded back by the legal successors of the sellers.

> To date, we have restituted large numbers of art works. Furthermore we have also returned objects of which the Berlin Museums are indisputably the legal owner to their place of origin on the basis of permanent loan agreements, in cooperation with our colleagues in the partner countries.

> These are just some of the arguments and the realities which lie behind the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums, and which prompted us to draft and publish this Declaration.

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The Declaration: A Contested Issue

by **George Abungu**

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There are several issues raised by the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. Firstly, many museum collections worldwide, particularly in the West, house collections with a suspect history, particularly as regards how objects were acquired. Many were acquired through conquest, others were stolen while still others were brought to museums for study and never returned to their original owners. But if large scale repatriation were to take

place, then of course many museums would be left with hardly any collections at all. The Declaration responds to the fear of many museum directors that they would be left with empty museums or with hardly any collections worth talking about. This seems to me to be an unnecessary fear.

> Secondly, I strongly contest the idea that some museums may call themselves Universal Museums. Surely all museums share a common mission and a shared vision. Do Universal Museums claim to be universal on the grounds of their size, their collections, how rich they are? Moreover, each museum should have something special that makes it of universal value for humanity. For example, the National Museums of Kenya, of which I was Director until 2002, is universally known for its work on human origins. It hosts the largest Hominid collection under one roof in the world; it hosts the Centre for Biodiversity for Kenya, which is the largest in East and Central Africa; the East African Herbarium (for Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania); and in its invertebrate zoology department, it has over 2 million insect specimens - probably the largest in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Institute for Primate Research of the National Museums of Kenya carries out research in all areas of biomedical research including research on HIV/AIDS vaccines. These are just a few of the Museum's major activities which have universal implications. Yet the National Museums of Kenya was not asked to join the group of Universal Museums. So what is the basis of their universal value? Are Universal Museums based solely in Europe and North America?

> It seems to me that the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums is signed principally by a group of large museums who want to create a different pedigree of museum, largely due to fears that materials held in their collections of which the ownership is contested, will face claims for repatriation. It is a way of refusing to engage in dialogue around the issue of repatriation. If the signatories of the Declaration are trying to create the idea that their collections are held in trust for all of humanity, then why do they still call themselves by their original names? Why not "Universal Museum in Britain" rather than "British Museum"?

> I personally do not believe in mass repatriation, except for human remains and materials of great emotional and spiritual value to a group. I do believe, however, that there should always be dialogue between museums, and between museums and communities affected by issues of repatriation, in order to reach amicable solutions. Solutions may even include acceptance by the community concerned of the present ownership situation, and the museum may be provided with a permanent loan. However, to declare that museums are universal, solely in order to avoid such discussions, is the wrong way to go about such issues. This is why I do not support the Declaration nor the notion of Universal Museum.

> I have a lot of admiration for many of the Directors of these museums. Apart from being very respected scholars and leaders in the field of museums, they have contributed immensely to getting the role of museums in society recognised. I do, however, want to ask them to stick together with other museums in the same spirit rather than create a separate class of museum.

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