

Abstract

By Susan Taylor

For over 125 years, American art museums have built encyclopedic collections that have educated, informed, and even transformed their constituencies' encounters with art. The fundamental nature of any art museum is to serve the public and to preserve and interpret our shared heritage. With comprehensive collections, the artistic achievements of all civilizations are presented, offering the public the unique opportunity to examine works of art directly in the context of their own and other cultures. For many visitors, art museums have often been the first exposure to other cultures, peoples and countries. In recent years, the acquisition of antiquities has become the subject of intense discussion and careful consideration by the museum profession, our colleagues in the field of archaeology, and most significantly, by source countries that have actively pursued ownership claims with a number of American and European museums. As a result, the art museum profession has examined its policies in response to this changing environment and has adopted new policies for collecting ancient art and archaeological material.

This presentation will examine the nature of some repatriation claims, what American museums gain by the return of works of art that have been illegally exported from source countries and what they have lost. There will also be a review of how new AAMD guidelines will affect collecting by American museums. It will assess the benefits of new collaborative opportunities with source countries and outline new initiatives to make accessible ancient art and archaeological material. The paper will also present source country perspectives and how these new acquisition policies have the potential, over the long term, to both benefit and limit new scholarship and interpretive opportunities.

Finally, the presentation will outline the issues regarding the establishment of legal markets reviewing the pros and cons of this approach with an opportunity to discuss openly how such structures may impact the market and the study of our ancient heritage.