

***Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches.* Louis Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis, eds. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014. 189 pp.\***

Reviewed by Alex W. Barker

One of the most far-reaching, systematic, and unsettling changes in museum anthropology over the course of the past four decades has been a shift in the perceived relationship between museums collecting materials and the source communities from which those materials are derived. In the minds of many museum professionals it was and had long been, for the most part, a close and collaborative relationship, in which museums curators served as advocates for and interpretive experts on source communities and countries. More recently it has become clear that these sources took a very different view, seeing the relationship as fundamentally exploitative, premised on profound disparities in power, and one in which the alienation of objects was based on coercion rather than freely given consent.

*Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches* examines museum responses to issues of repatriation and restitution in ten chapters, plus a well-balanced and thoughtful introduction by volume editors Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis. Importantly, the volume considers both repatriation *sensu stricto*—the return of human ancestral remains and cultural items to descendant communities or source nations—and restitution or other transfers of items from museums to claimants in recognition of past losses or injustices but without a presumption that those items are directly returning to descendants or previous possessors. Conflation of the two, and disagreement over which is represented in any given instance, remains a source of friction between curators and claimants in contexts worldwide. Equally valuable is the volume’s global perspective, as repatriation issues are inflected in different ways based on specific historical contingencies, yet often use the same terms with subtly (and sometimes quite significantly) different implied meanings and moral encompassments.

Contributions, based on a July 2010 conference at the Manchester Museum, are divided into three sections. Overviews are offered by Tristram Besterman and Piotr Bienkowski, critiquing universalist and essentialist views privileging institutions holding objects, and offering more inclusive and less adversarial alternatives based on a democratized approach to control and custody of both objects and their accompanying narratives. For Besterman, museums which presume to speak exclusively for the communities represented commit yet another misappropriation. A more sustainable approach allows different voices to speak to the significance and relevance of objects, including but not privileging the expert or magisterial curatorial voice. He argues for a democratization of museum practice, noting, for example, that a 2009 poll conducted by *The Guardian* found that some 95% of those responding favored the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece, indicating “an issue that should, at the very least, be properly and publicly debated with the museum” (31).

Bienkowski further critiques the “expert culture” of museums, in which claims to expert knowledge, control, and authority to judge the value of objects and the legitimacy of both claims

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and claimants, fetishizes ownership rather than serves the larger mission of the institution. Instead Bienkowski calls for museums to set aside processes that require claimants to demonstrate the legitimacy of their claims, and instead “become loci of deliberative democracy,” in which all participants have “an equal right to suggest topics of conversation, to introduce new points of view, questions and criticisms into the conversation, and to challenge the rules of the conversation insofar as these seem to exclude the voice of some and privilege that of others” (48). Such groups would then make decisions more agreeable to all because of the transparency of the process; some participants might disagree with the group decision, but could be more easily reconciled because they would recognize the good-faith positions of other parties.

What makes Besterman’s contribution provocative is less its emphasis on cultural equity and museum accountability than his suggestion that satisfying such mandates is a matter of self-interest that directly benefits museums. The examples he gives—press coverage and recognition following his return of looted dinosaur eggshells to Argentina when he served as director of the Manchester Museum, and Andy Holden’s art project “Pyramid Piece and Return of Pyramid Piece” representing a fragment of the Great Pyramid of Cheops which the artist had removed from Egypt as a boy, and whose return became both an installation at Tate Britain and a film documenting the artist’s attempt to find the exact location from which it had been removed—pose tantalizing questions. When museums reposition themselves as the fora for debates regarding ownership, legitimacy, and interpretive authority, have they ceded control or merely co-opted the participants and appropriated the debate? Bienkowski’s essay raises similarly intriguing questions. Would museums long remain viable centers for public debate regarding the role of objects if they no longer focused on nor custodians of such objects?

Four chapters examine how repatriation is practiced in specific contexts, with individual chapters examining Scandinavian, New Zealand, Scottish, and U.S. museum examples. Eeva-Kristiina Harlin and Anne May Olli review Sámi repatriation efforts, which are complicated by the four different state jurisdictions within which Sámi reside. Sámi human remains from Norway are housed separately from other anatomical collections and access is controlled by the Norwegian Sámi Parliament. From Finland some remains have been repatriated and reburied, while others are administered by Sámi museums but without the right of reburial. In Sweden some remains have been successfully repatriated and reburied while other cases remain in discussion or dispute. Repatriation of Sámi cultural heritage presents other challenges, both in the absence of statutory mandates for such returns and because of widespread pesticide contamination of objects in non-Sámi museums. Harlin and Olli note that while traditional Sámi techniques of fur storage would generally be more effective in preserving Sámi material culture, they are now compromised by increasing insect populations in high-latitude areas associated with climate change.

Conal McCarthy’s case study of the return of the Maori meeting house *Te Hau ki Tūranga* to the Rongowhakaata people emphasizes the pragmatic processes of resolving claims and the diversity of viewpoints and concerns raised within both the museum and source communities. But it also illustrates the lengthy timeframes sometimes involved. Here community members had sought the return of the house since its seizure in the New Zealand wars in 1867. A formal claim was filed in 1989, heard by the Tribunal in 2002, resulting in a deed of settlement in 2011, which called

for the return of *Te Hau ki Tūranga* by 2017 along with large financial settlements for relocation, care, development of a cultural revitalization plan and cultural redress.

Neil Curtis discusses the impact of repatriation requests on Scottish museums, considering all 23 repatriation requests submitted from 1990-2010. Most (20) involved human remains, and Curtis has elsewhere discussed the impact of Western conceptions of the body on how claims for human remains are interpreted. Here he also examines the context in which Scotland—a nation advancing its own claims for the return of cultural patrimony—considers requests for objects from Scottish museums, and how the nation’s own rhetorical positions influence its response to such external requests.

In the section’s final chapter Helen Robbins discusses both the requirements and limitations of the U.S. Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA provided a legal basis for repatriation claims by federally-recognized U.S. tribes, Alaskan villages, and Native Hawaiian organizations against federally-funded U.S. museums, and without its provisions it is unlikely that most such museums would have fully and sympathetically entertained repatriation requests. Despite this very real accomplishment, the Act also falls short in many respects. Robbins offers a frank discussion of ways in which the Act is flawed or ambiguous and thus contributes to, rather than resolves, differences between Native communities and museums, and points to efforts by both Native communities and museums to develop new projects transcending these limitations.

The final section contains four chapters reconsidering and reflecting on repatriations or, in the case of the final chapter on the Elgin Marbles, the refusal to repatriate. Maureen Matthews begins with a well-theorized chapter discussing an Ojibwe water drum (*mitigwakik*) serving as Gellian actor and participant in a case of erroneous repatriation. While the source community had a clear and fully documented interest in the objects, they were quietly turned over to a more visible and active revitalization group unconnected to the source community. It was, Matthews writes, “a situation where the conjunction of politicized museum artefacts and honestly held views about cultural rights led to a gross injustice” (122). Matthews argues that repatriation claims implicitly require all parties to converse in “museal discourse,” and because the actual source community engaged with the objects (and thus the museum) using their own cultural practices and modes of discourse they were judged to have a lesser claim (the notion of a claim itself privileging object-based discourse) than U.S.-based activists who phrased their claims in museal terms.

Demelza van der Maas presents another theoretically sophisticated chapter placing repatriation (and, ultimately, the increasing ubiquity of museums) within a larger humanistic shift connecting the construction of identities with the material presence of the past. Van der Maas posits an arc in which Kantian constructs, privileging spirit over matter, effectively legitimized the objectification of bodies and skeletal remains from the 18th century onward, values increasingly challenged as more recent humanistic approaches located identities (and their associated authority and power) in reference to a tangible past. Van der Maas examines the removal and later restitution (she uses both restitution and repatriation in relation to the case) of six skulls from the Zuiderzee islands of Urk, collected in the 19th century when Urkers were believed to be the most “pure” Dutch population. Arguments for restitution and retention presented to the

Ethical Committee of the Netherlands Museums Association, which ultimately decided the case, are discussed in detail and tied to these different constructions of identity and materiality.

Most chapters in *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches* examine claims by source countries and communities. Ines Katzenhusen's chapter is a departure, providing a case study of a specific set of artworks by Russo-Polish suprematist painter and art theoretician Kazimir Malevich, and informed by the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art. Malevich traveled outside Russia only once, for retrospectives in Warsaw, Munich, and Berlin, but returned to Russia shortly after the opening leaving the artworks behind. After his death, more than 100 of these works were stored in a crate in the Hanover State Museum and became dispersed after the Nazis came to power. Works were then sold or loaned from this set, and Katzenhusen traces the provenance of works to the Harvard art museums, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Stedelijk in Amsterdam. Her chapter outlines the dynamics of art markets and mixed motivations of museum directors in acquiring these works, and their different responses to requests for restitution. Of the 107 paintings, only seven were ultimately returned to the family.

The volume's final chapter, by Kalliopi Fouseki, examines Greek public opinion regarding that most celebrated of repatriation controversies, the return of the Elgin marbles to Greece. Based on a survey of Athenians conducted in 2010, she carefully distinguishes two parallel but distinct modes of discourse concerning their return. Reunification arguments, phrased by and largely aimed at academic audiences, are part of an "authorized heritage discourse" privileging academic or scholarly viewpoints (aesthetics, monumentality, etc.), while more popular repatriation arguments invoke an idealized sense of place and national identity in which the marbles index national ideals independent of their archaeological context. Reunification views "place" in narrower and more specific terms, while repatriation focuses on return to Greece as a nation rather than the Acropolis as a place. She argues that demands for the return of cultural property should address both. As an aside, based on her data and a 2009 poll by *The Guardian* (also cited by Besterman) the percentage of respondents feeling the marbles should remain at the British Museum is higher in Athens than in England—an irony which should not overshadow the fact that opinion strongly favors return in both surveys.

As a group the essays are lively and thoughtful, and offer insights into how the processes and prospects of restitution and repatriation may strengthen not only the communities retrieving their heritage but also the museums that engage with source communities or countries to make such returns possible. I should note, however, that I was struck by how many of the returns by European museums—and the prevalence of European examples is one of the strengths of the volume—come with significant strings. Besterman, for example, celebrates the perspicacity of English parliamentarians who "fortunately... recognize an injustice when they see it" (21) and passed a private members bill allowing some museums to return art stolen by the Nazis to claimants, although it applied to 17 named museums only, and sunsetted after ten years. Similarly Curtis discusses the return of a Ghost Dance shirt from the Glasgow Museums to the Lakota as a widely accepted as a model of good practice, but it was returned only on condition that "the shirt be preserved in perpetuity... displayed at all reasonable times in an appropriate place" (91) and that it would be loaned to Glasgow in the future. And while the skulls of Urkers

and many Sámi human remains held in Finland have been nominally repatriated, they cannot be reburied under terms of the transfer and must remain available for study.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.19070>