



Who Owns Antiquity?

Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage
by James Cuno (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). 256 pp.,
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The battle in James Cuno's book pits museums against nation-states. He argues that the former are trying to ensure accessibility to our global ancient heritage, while the latter are trying to keep "antiquities" (ancient artifacts) out of the global public domain by insisting that they are national patrimony that should be returned (repatriated) to their country of origin. For Cuno, any relationship between nation-states and the archaeological past located within their modern borders is simply an historical accident (meaning repatriation requests are often untenable). Furthermore, he argues that nation-states have not effectively protected this archaeological past (by stopping looting) and, therefore, the best solution to manage cultural heritage is to reinstate a policy of *partage* whereby countries share the material results of archaeological research.

As Director of the Art Institute of Chicago, Cuno is clearly an interested party to the current debate over museums' ethical responsibilities to stem the illicit movement of archaeological artifacts and to repatriate antiquities. As such, his book had the potential to further this debate. Unfortunately, *Who Owns Antiquity?* is a retrenchment rather than an attempt at compromise. His selective critique of nationalist politics and his deployment of the idea of a common global heritage do not re-envision the relationships between museums, nation-states, and the archaeological past. Rather, it replicates the actual past relationships that gave rise to the current situation and the call for control over ancient artifacts and for repatriation.

His argument that nation-states are heterogeneous entities that often use the past to legitimate the present is not new. Indeed, many scholars have pointed out exactly

how archaeology—including depictions of the past in museums—has been intimately linked to the nation- and empire-building enterprise. As Cuno recapitulates this critique, however, he omits the fact that such manipulation has not been confined to the countries or the national museums that he highlights as being politically motivated. In fact, historians of museums have demonstrated that the encyclopedic museums that he champions are equally political in that they emerged out of paradigms that sought to further and legitimize imperial ambitions. Furthermore, his seamless movement between "encyclopedic museum," "encyclopedic art museum," "art," and "artifact" overlooks the very different ways these objects (re)entered circulation. The issue at hand is not only where the objects have ended up, but also how they initially got there.

Cuno notes that people and objects have continuously crossed boundaries, and that such movement makes it almost impossible to map contemporary (national) identities onto the past. Therefore, he argues, it makes more sense to talk about global, rather than national, heritage, and, as a result, we should reinstitute a system of *partage* that would ensure a wide distribution of ancient material. Interestingly, what he does not do is present a framework that would ensure a truly wide distribution. *Partage*, as historically practiced, led to the concentration of global material in relatively few institutions clustered in Europe and North America. If, as Cuno says, encyclopedic museums are "a good idea, period," how could we establish them in places where they do not now exist? Would European and North American encyclopedic museums part with locally derived artifacts (such as a Monet or the Liberty Bell) so that an encyclopedic museum could be established in another part of the world? 🏠