Ownership, Representation, and Repatriation

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As incoming secretary for CMA, I wish to call attention to, and provoke deeper considerations about, colonial ideologies and ethical concerns that face professionals in the field of museum anthropology today. Museums have always, both overtly and covertly, been engaged in the selective representation and contextualization of notable objects, cultures and histories over space and time. Anthropologists and museum professionals, in their roles as collectors and culture-brokers, have also been responsible for misrepresenting, alienating and even losing many significant cultural items. What, then, is most at stake when old issues and old collections resurface?

Since the late twentieth century, American and European museums have increasingly found themselves enmeshed in contentious discourse around issues of ownership, representation and repatriation. Collectors who once enjoyed free rein to amass and display the possessions of ethnographic “others” must now interface with those “others.” Some positive changes have resulted from the inclusion of underrepresented minorities as museum professionals and cultural consultants. Other changes have been forced by national and international laws and protocols surrounding cultural patrimony. In the post-NAGPRA era, museums can no longer be complacent about their once-routine possession and display of indigenous human remains and cultural objects.

Although these changes have inspired important shifts in the intellectual and ethical dimensions of anthropological research and discourse, the trending toward ethics has not entirely shifted public beliefs and collecting habits. By way of example, here are two current issues that illustrate the political dimensions of old collections.

In May 2009, two items of national patrimony—a Mohawk wampum belt from Kanesatake and an Abenaki wampum belt, both clearly identified as indigenous objects from the early 1700s—surfaced in a sale of American Indian art at Sotheby’s auction house. The Haudenosaunee Standing Committee on Burial Rules and Regulations requested my assistance in provenance research, and we successfully convinced Sotheby’s to halt the sale, but the belts have not yet been repatriated.

My research revealed that both belts had been alienated from their communities of origin during the early twentieth century by non-Native collectors who deposited them at the Museum of the American Indian (MAI) in New York. During the 1970s, despite a very public search for stolen Wampum by the Haudenosaunee, both belts were suspiciously removed from MAI (along with more than 43,000 other Native objects) for sale to wealthy private collectors. These wampum belts (and other objects) were hidden from Native communities by virtue of their circulation in two different public venues—the museum world and the art market. Museums are subject to federal repatriation legislation and tribal consultation; private collectors are not. Had these belts remained at MAI when the collections were transferred to Washington in 1989, they would have been subject to the National Museum of the American Indian Act, and could have been repatriated (as were 76 other Wampum items from NMAI, including a companion Kanesatake belt).

What is at stake in situations like these? To Native people, wampum belts are living entities, as dear as human relatives, entrusted with both spiritual significance and political responsibilities by virtue of the words spoken into them. To art dealers, they are inanimate objects of high monetary value, communicating the aesthetic desires and personal wealth of those who hold them captive.

In a similar case of situational ethics on the open market, in January 2010, Christie’s auction house advertised a human skull and two femora, transformed into a ballot box, once the property of Yale University’s Skull and Bones Society (S&B). Native museum professionals immediately raised an outcry, and Christie’s was convinced to withdraw this item from sale after an unnamed party claimed the remains. What happens next? Given the knowledge that S&B members are known to have excavated Apache gravesites, might this individual be Native? Regardless of origins, are this person’s bones not subject to regulations that restrict the handling and sale of human remains?
remains? Whose relative is this? Does Yale bear any responsibility?

Cases like these challenge us to consider and mediate disputes that link culture, ethics, law, property and kin, as we grapple with the legacies of collections from the past. How best can we communicate these complex concerns to the museum-going public? With these issues in mind, I encourage my colleagues to review their own experiences. What forces are shaping issues of ownership and representation in your collections? I encourage you to share your unique perspectives by sending news to this column, submitting articles for consideration to our editors at Museum Anthropology (the journal of CMA), or checking out the Museum Anthropology blog at http://museumanthropology.blogspot.com.

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