

Forum: Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (GA3)

Issue: The question of ownership and possession of foreign cultural art

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural art, including sculptures, manuscripts, and historical relics, offer us glimpses into the rich tapestry of human civilizations and their achievements. Be that as it may, the rightful ownership of such artifacts has become a matter of contention and debate globally.

These artifacts are not only objects of study and appreciation, but also vital tools for fostering cultural understanding and promoting mutual respect among nations. The art holds immense historical, cultural, and artistic value. It provides tangible connections to our past, allowing us to explore the traditions, beliefs, and artistic expressions of diverse ancient societies.

Although ancient, the question of ownership and possession of this cultural art has recently gained significant attention due to various reasons. Historical injustices, particularly during the era of colonization, have resulted in the removal and acquisition of cultural artifacts without proper consent or documentation. Many countries and indigenous communities argue that these objects were taken from their rightful owners under oppressive circumstances. This has led to ongoing disputes over their ownership and ethical considerations regarding their return.

Additionally, armed conflicts, looting, and illicit trade have contributed to the displacement and loss of cultural art. Consequently, efforts to repatriate these artifacts have gained momentum, as there is a desire to restore cultural identity, preserve cultural heritage, and heal historical wounds.

This is due to the significance of ownership and possession of foreign cultural art for indigenous communities is a pressing matter. These communities hold deep spiritual and cultural value in sacred objects and ancestral art. Repatriating these items is seen as a way to reclaim cultural pride, strengthen their identity, and protect their intangible cultural heritage.

In today's interconnected world, cultural art often ends up in museums and private collections in different countries. This raises ethical concerns for the institutions that house them. Museums, in particular, face dilemmas regarding the acquisition, display, and potential

repatriation of these artifacts. Balancing public access, preservation, and ethical considerations surrounding disputed objects presents, therefore, significant challenges.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Cultural Art

Cultural art refers to artistic expressions and creations that are shaped by the cultural values, traditions, beliefs, and practices of a particular society or community. It encompasses a wide range of artistic forms, including visual arts, performing arts, literature, music, dance, architecture, crafts, and more. Cultural art serves as a means of expressing and preserving cultural identity, reflecting the unique perspectives, aesthetics, and creative expressions of diverse cultures worldwide. It often carries significant historical, social, and symbolic meaning, offering insights into the traditions, customs, and experiences of a particular group or society.

Ownership

Ownership refers to the legal or rightful possession of a property, object, or asset. In the context of cultural art, ownership pertains to the rights and legal claims held by individuals, communities, institutions, or nations over specific cultural objects or collections.

Possession

Possession refers to having physical control, custody, or occupation of a property or object. It signifies the immediate control or holding of a cultural art, whether it is owned or not. Possession does not necessarily imply ownership, as an object can be possessed by someone who does not legally own it.

Repatriation

Repatriation is the act of returning cultural artifacts to their country of origin or the communities from which they were taken. It involves the transfer of ownership and physical possession to the rightful owners or their designated representatives.

Provenance

Provenance refers to the documented history or origin of a cultural art, including its ownership, custody, and transfer history. It provides a record of the artifact's journey from its creation or discovery to its current location. Provenance research involves tracing and documenting this history to establish the authenticity, legal ownership, and rightful possession of an object.

Indigenous Rights

Indigenous rights are the inherent and collective rights of indigenous people, recognizing their unique cultural, social, economic, and political rights. These rights encompass self-determination, cultural identity, land and resource ownership, and the preservation of indigenous languages, traditions, and knowledge systems.

Colonialism

Colonialism refers to a historical era characterized by the establishment and exploitation of colonies by powerful nations in other territories. It involved political, economic, and cultural domination, often resulting in the subjugation, displacement, and erasure of indigenous cultures and traditions.

Illicit Trade

Illicit trade refers to the illegal or unauthorized trade, trafficking, or smuggling of cultural art. It involves the illegal acquisition, sale, or transfer of cultural objects, often through organized criminal networks or opportunistic individuals. Illicit trade contributes to the fragmentation, loss, and destruction of cultural heritage.

Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage encompasses the tangible and intangible expressions of a society's traditions, practices, knowledge, and artifacts that are passed down from generation to generation. It includes physical structures, cultural landscapes, rituals, languages, arts, and cultural art, representing the collective identity, history, and values of a community or nation.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging, attachment, and identification individuals or communities have with a particular culture or cultural group. It encompasses shared customs, beliefs, values, traditions, and practices that shape an individual's or community's self-perception and interaction with others.

Restitution

Restitution refers to the act of returning cultural art or property to their rightful owners or their descendants. It involves acknowledging past injustices, rectifying historical wrongs, and restoring the cultural, historical, and symbolic significance of the objects. Restitution seeks to promote justice, healing, and reconciliation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Significance of Cultural Art

Cultural art, such as ancient sculptures and manuscripts, holds immense significance for a culture, providing invaluable insights into history, culture, and art. These artifacts serve as tangible connections to the past, allowing us to delve into the traditions, beliefs, and artistic expressions of diverse societies. They act as crucial tools in fostering cultural understanding and promoting mutual respect among nations.

One way cultural art is important to a culture is by offering valuable insights into ancient civilizations and their languages. For example, the Winged Victory of Samothrace¹, an ancient Greek sculpture, showcases the artistic brilliance of the Hellenistic period through its intricate craftsmanship and dynamic portrayal. The statue not only represents a significant cultural artifact but also offers a glimpse into the aesthetic and artistic sensibilities of the time. Similarly, manuscripts written in ancient languages, such as Egyptian hieroglyphs or Mayan glyphs, provide invaluable clues about the belief systems, societal structures, and intellectual achievements of ancient civilizations.

These artifacts also serve as repositories of cultural knowledge and wisdom. They embody traditional skills, craftsmanship, and artistic expressions that are passed down through generations. By owning and engaging with these artifacts, indigenous communities ensure the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger members, promoting intergenerational learning and preserving their unique cultural practices.

They also play a vital role in enhancing academic research, education, and cultural preservation. Scholars and researchers study these objects to gain a deeper understanding of past cultures, unravel historical mysteries, and contribute to academic knowledge. Educational institutions incorporate these artifacts into their curricula, allowing students to engage with tangible pieces of history and fostering a sense of connection to the past.

Owning and possessing cultural art is a powerful act of cultural revitalization and pride for indigenous communities. These artifacts become visible symbols of their cultural distinctiveness, resilience, and resistance to assimilation. By reclaiming and celebrating their cultural heritage through these artifacts, indigenous communities assert their right to self-determination, promote cultural pride, and combat the historical erasure and marginalization they have faced.

¹ artincontext. "Nike of Samothrace - a Look at the "Winged Victory of Samothrace" Statue." *Artincontext.org*, 26 November 2021, artincontext.org/nike-of-samothrace/

Furthermore, indigenous cultural artifacts often reflect a deep connection to the land and environment. Cultural artifacts hold significant spiritual and ceremonial value for indigenous communities. They are integral to rituals, ceremonies, and sacred practices that play a central role in their spiritual beliefs and connection with the natural world. The presence of these artifacts during these occasions helps maintain the spiritual balance and vitality of the community, fostering a collective sense of identity and well-being. They incorporate materials, symbols, and designs that represent the local ecology, traditional territories, or ancestral stories related to the land. The possession of these artifacts reinforces the interconnectedness of indigenous communities with their environment and reinforces their stewardship role.

Moreover, cultural art enriches our comprehension of human history as a whole. Each artifact tells a unique story about the development and achievements of a specific culture, shedding light on its values, customs, and societal dynamics. By exploring these artifacts, we broaden our understanding of the diversity of human experiences throughout history and gain a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of cultural heritage that shapes our world.

Identity Loss in Cultural Art

For indigenous communities, owning or possessing cultural art is essential for their culture's identity and overall health. Furthermore, the loss of intangible cultural practices and knowledge accompanies the removal of artifacts. Indigenous cultures are rich with oral traditions, rituals, and customs that are intimately tied to these material objects. The artifacts themselves often carry stories, songs, and practices that are integral to the community's collective memory and worldview. As these artifacts are taken away, the associated intangible cultural heritage is weakened, resulting in a loss of traditional knowledge and the erosion of cultural practices.

The consequences of this disconnection and cultural erosion extend beyond the affected communities. The global cultural landscape suffers from the loss of diverse cultural expressions and the diminishing richness of human heritage. Each indigenous community contributes to the global mosaic of cultural diversity, offering unique perspectives, artistic traditions, and ways of life. When these communities experience disconnection and cultural erosion, the global community loses the opportunity to learn from their wisdom, creativity, and alternative ways of being.

Moreover, the consequences of removing cultural artifacts extend beyond the cultural realm. The loss of cultural heritage can have social, economic, and political ramifications. Socially, cultural erosion can undermine the social fabric of communities, impacting civil cohesion and resilience. While economically, cultural tourism, which often relies on the preservation and celebration of cultural heritage, can be negatively affected when communities no longer possess or have access to their cultural artifacts. And politically, the loss of cultural heritage can

perpetuate power imbalances and contribute to ongoing marginalization and discrimination against indigenous communities.

Significant cultural disruptions were experienced by the Native Hawaiian people due to Hawaii's colonization². Numerous cultural artifacts, such as religious objects, ceremonial items, and ancestral remains were removed from the islands and scattered across museums and collections worldwide. As a result, cultural continuity and traditional practices have been lost among the Native Hawaiian community.

Ethical Considerations

Historical Context

Another vital consideration is the historical context in which these artifacts were obtained. Many were acquired during times of colonialism, looting, and illicit trade. Therefore, it becomes apparent that the acquisition of cultural artifacts may have involved actions that were exploitative or in violation of ethical standards. Addressing these past injustices is seen as an ethical obligation, as it involves rectifying the consequences of exploitation and acknowledging the impact of these actions on the affected communities.

Ownership

In the absence of clear guidelines, establishing rightful ownership requires a comprehensive assessment of various factors. Historical evidence, legal frameworks, and engagement in dialogue between museums and the communities or nations of origin all contribute to the ethical deliberation surrounding ownership. By considering these elements, it becomes possible to determine the legitimacy of a museum's claim to ownership and assess the ethical implications thereof.

Global Cultural Heritage vs Rights of Communities

In this ethical balancing act, museums advocate for the broader impact of preserving and displaying cultural artifacts. They contend that their expertise, resources, and state-of-the-art facilities enable them to conserve these objects in the best possible conditions, ensuring their longevity and accessibility. By doing so, museums assert that they contribute to the appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures, promoting a shared global heritage.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this argument also brings ethical concerns into focus. While museums emphasize their broader role in the preservation of cultural heritage, the rights of communities to their own artifacts must not be overshadowed. The ethical dilemma lies in finding a balance that respects the importance

² "The Reality of Looted Colonial Art and Restitution – DW – 11/19/2021." *Deutsche Welle*, 19 November 2021, www.dw.com/en/the-reality-of-looted-colonial-art-and-restitution/a-59858610.

of global cultural heritage while recognizing the rights of communities to their cultural property and the potential benefits of local preservation, research, and display.

Economic Implications

Museums often argue that returning significant portions of their collections could have adverse economic effects. They contend that these artifacts are not only valuable cultural treasures, but also important assets that contribute to their financial stability. Museums rely on the presence of such artifacts to attract visitors, generate revenue through exhibitions and events, and support their various activities. Therefore, returning these objects may lead to a reduction in the resources available for research, education, and public programs, potentially compromising the museums' ability to fulfill their missions.

However, while acknowledging these economic considerations, it is essential to seek sustainable solutions that address these concerns while ensuring fair treatment and representation for all stakeholders involved. This requires a balance between the financial viability of museums and the cultural rights and aspirations of communities and nations from which the artifacts originate. Sustainable solutions could involve collaborations, partnerships, or temporary exhibitions that allow for cultural exchange and shared access to the artifacts, while still addressing the economic concerns of museums.

Contention over Ownership and Possession

The global debate surrounding foreign cultural art centers on rightful ownership and possession, which has become highly contentious. The era of colonization in history saw colonizing powers forcibly acquire and remove cultural art from their original contexts. The objects were handled without proper consent or documentation, showing disregard for their cultural and historical importance. Thus, conflicts over ownership arise with ethical complications around returning them.

A clear illustration of such disagreements is provided by the case involving the Parthenon or Elgin marbles³. The ownership of the Elgin Marbles, ancient Greek sculptures currently housed in the British Museum, has been a source of conflict between Greece and the United Kingdom.

Greece has made efforts to reclaim the Elgin Marbles, arguing that they were removed from the Parthenon in Athens during the early 19th century under controversial circumstances. The Greek government claims that the sculptures were taken without proper authorization and that their return is essential for the preservation of Greek cultural heritage and national identity.

³ Marshall, Alex. "After 220 Years, the Fate of the Parthenon Marbles Rests in Secret Talks." *The New York Times*, 17 January 2023, www.nytimes.com/2023/01/17/arts/design/parthenon-sculptures-elgin-marbles-negotiations.html.

Greece has established the Acropolis Museum in Athens, believing it to be the ideal home for the marbles, providing contextual unity and allowing them to be displayed in their original setting.

In contrast, the British Museum asserts legal ownership and justifies their possession of the marbles based on the actions of Lord Elgin, who acquired permission from the Ottoman authorities ruling Greece at the time. The museum argues that the marbles were obtained through legal means and that their preservation, study, and public accessibility are best ensured within the museum's walls. They present the concept of a universal museum, asserting that the marbles are part of a collection representing the global heritage of humanity, and that their removal would set a precedent for numerous claims for repatriation from museums worldwide.

Internationally, the case has sparked debate and evoked varied responses. Some support Greece's call for repatriation, emphasizing the importance of cultural heritage to national identity and the need to address historical injustices. Others argue in favor of the British Museum, highlighting the concept of a universal museum and the educational value derived from the marbles' global display. Numerous cultural and political organizations like the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports and the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles (BCRPM) have been involved in the discussions, voicing their opinions and influencing public perception.

This case exemplifies the ethical complexity surrounding the ownership of cultural art. It raises questions about historical context, rightful ownership, preservation, access, and the balance between national and global heritage. The conflicting arguments from both sides reflect the challenges of finding a resolution that respects the rights and aspirations of both nations while considering the broader implications for the preservation and accessibility of cultural artifacts. The Elgin Marbles case serves as a prominent example of the ongoing dialogue on the repatriation of cultural art and the ethical considerations that arise from such discussions.

The Legacy of Colonialism

Colonizing powers forcefully acquired and removed cultural art from their original contexts during the era of colonization. While pursuing wealth, power and cultural domination, European nations pillaged the cultural heritage of colonized territories. Temple dismantling, looting archaeological sites, and confiscating sacred objects and artworks were often partaken in these acts.

During colonization, acquiring and removing cultural artifacts was more common due to various factors. These include the belief in cultural superiority and the desire to validate dominance over indigenous cultures, the trophy mentality of displaying conquered artifacts as a symbol of power and prestige, the exploitation and control of colonized territories, the justification of research and study purposes, and the pursuit of economic gain and commercial interests. These actions disregarded the rights and agency of the colonized communities and have sparked ongoing discussions and efforts to repatriate these artifacts and address the ethical implications of their acquisition during the colonial era.

The outcome of colonization was extensive cultural destruction for the Native American tribes in North America. Museums or private collections have forcibly taken sacred objects, ceremonial regalia, and ancestral artifacts from indigenous communities. These art's removal resulted in disruption for the people's cultural continuity leading to erosions in spiritual practices while also causing a severance from both land and heritage.

In parts of Africa, colonization also involved cultural appropriation, where indigenous art forms and practices were devalued or co-opted by colonizers. Traditional artistic expressions were often suppressed or modified to fit colonial tastes and preferences. This led to a loss of authenticity and diluted cultural identities, as indigenous art forms were marginalized or pushed aside in favor of European artistic standards.

The dominance of Western aesthetics introduced during colonization had a lasting impact on artistic production and reception in ancient Asian tribes. Indigenous artistic traditions were often marginalized, while European art forms and techniques were promoted as superior. This perpetuated a sense of artistic hierarchy, where indigenous art was deemed inferior or less valuable.

Armed Conflicts

The devastation caused by armed conflicts and wars extends to cultural heritage. Cultural artifacts often face looting, destruction or displacement during conflicts. Leading to cultural heritage loss, depriving communities of their historical narratives, erasing cultural diversity and undermining social cohesion.

Another example is the bombing of the Mostar Bridge (Stari Most) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Mostar Bridge, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, had significant cultural and historical value as a symbol of the region's multi-ethnic heritage. In 1993, during the Bosnian War, it was deliberately targeted and destroyed by Croatian forces. The destruction of the bridge, which had connected the city's Muslim and Croat communities for centuries, symbolized the fracture and separation between these communities. It exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions, deepened mistrust, and fueled further violence in the region.

Similar deliberate destruction of cultural artifacts and heritage sites occurred throughout the Balkan Wars. Historic mosques, churches, and other religious sites were targeted and vandalized as acts of aggression against rival ethnic and religious groups. The deliberate destruction of cultural symbols and artifacts aimed to undermine the historical presence and legitimacy of particular communities, further entrenching divisions and fueling animosity.

Looting and Illegal Trading

Illegal trading of cultural art exacerbates displacement and loss of cultural heritage. Organized criminal networks, along with opportunistic individuals, take advantage of conflicts and unstable regions to smuggle stolen artifacts and sell them on the black market. This illicit

trade causes a fragmented cultural heritage in addition to financing criminal activities that contribute to a vicious circle of conflict.

Looting refers to the unauthorized excavation and removal of artifacts from archaeological sites or cultural heritage sites. This can involve organized crime syndicates, opportunistic individuals, or even armed groups exploiting conflict zones. Looting often leads to the irreversible loss of context and historical information, as artifacts are removed from their original archaeological layers or cultural contexts.

Once stolen, cultural artifacts are often smuggled across borders to be sold on the black market. Smuggling techniques range from concealing artifacts in luggage or shipments to exploiting corruption and porous borders. Trafficking networks facilitate the illegal trade, connecting looters, intermediaries, and buyers. This underground market relies on secrecy and illegal channels to evade detection and law enforcement.

In the realm of cultural art, forgeries and fakes are widespread. Unscrupulous individuals produce replicas or artificially aged artifacts, imitating the style of authentic pieces. These forgeries are then introduced into the market, often with fraudulent provenance, to deceive buyers and evade legal scrutiny. The presence of forgeries further complicates efforts to trace and recover stolen cultural artifacts.

The illegal trade of cultural art often intersects with money laundering schemes. Proceeds from the sale of looted or illicitly traded artifacts can be laundered through complex financial transactions, making it difficult to trace the origins of the funds. The connection between the black market for cultural art and money laundering – which is the process of making illegally obtained money appear legal by disguising its true source – poses challenges for law enforcement agencies attempting to disrupt these illegal networks.

The rise of the internet and e-commerce has provided a platform for the sale of illicit cultural artifacts. Online marketplaces, social media platforms, and encrypted messaging apps have become channels for the advertising and trading of stolen and smuggled cultural art. The anonymity and global reach of these platforms make it harder to monitor and regulate illegal activities in the digital realm.

The historical acquisition of the Koh-i-Noor Diamond through colonial practices raises questions of whether it can be considered as looting or theft. The diamond was taken from India without consent or authorization, becoming part of the British Crown Jewels. This raises questions about the legality and ethics of its possession, as it was acquired through looting and subsequent illegal trading in the cultural art market which can be seen as part of an illegal market for cultural artifacts. The complexities surrounding its ownership highlight the challenges caused by looting and illegal trading, raising concerns about rightful ownership and the need for restitution to the country of origin.

Cultural art dispersed across multiple countries and private collections result in significant challenges in terms of ownership and possession. The preservation of the integrity and authenticity of cultural art demands efforts towards reuniting dispersed collections and ensuring proper documentation.

Restoration

Repatriation as a Means of Restoration

For indigenous communities, cultural art repatriation carries great importance. In essence, it helps in restoring lost culture by reclaiming or reviving one's traditions that foster unity while also preserving one 'shared history. To achieve the goals of restoring justice, promoting cultural diversity, and healing historical wounds is why repatriation efforts are made.

The restoration of cultural artifacts is a complex and debated topic. Supporters emphasize the importance of preserving cultural heritage, rectifying historical injustices, revitalizing cultural practices, and facilitating educational and research opportunities. They argue that restoration safeguards the identity and traditions of communities while promoting cultural continuity.

Opponents raise concerns about the challenges associated with restoration, including the potential harm to the artifacts, loss of contextual integrity, allocation of limited resources, and difficulties in determining ownership and repatriation. They question the need to alter or remove artifacts from their original context, suggesting that appreciation within their historical setting may be more meaningful. Additionally, they argue for prioritizing resources towards pressing social and economic issues faced by communities.

In 2014, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland returned a Benin Bronze to Nigeria, marking the first significant repatriation of a Benin Bronze from a major Western institution. Since then, other institutions have followed suit. For example, in 2020, the University of Cambridge in England agreed to return a bronze cockerel known as the Okukor to Nigeria.

The success of the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria highlights the significance of returning a cultural artifact to its country of origin. Firstly, it acknowledges the historical injustices of colonial-era looting and recognizes the rights of the affected community to reclaim their cultural heritage. It fosters healing, reconciliation, and a sense of justice. Secondly, the repatriation contributes to the preservation and revitalization of Nigeria's cultural heritage by showcasing and preserving the artistic and cultural traditions of the Benin people. Finally, the return of the Benin Bronzes has positive socio-economic impacts, revitalizing cultural tourism and generating economic benefits for local communities through sustainable development and job creation in the cultural heritage

sector. Overall, the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes signifies an important step towards rectifying historical injustices and ensuring the preservation and appreciation of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage.

Collaborative Conservation

Collaborative conservation involves active collaboration between custodian institutions and communities of origin. This approach recognizes the importance of community involvement, traditional knowledge, and cultural practices in the restoration process. By promoting shared decision-making, capacity-building, and a sense of ownership among communities, collaborative conservation ensures the preservation and relevance of cultural artifacts. It fosters inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, allowing for a more holistic restoration that aligns with the cultural values and aspirations of the community. However, effective communication, mutual trust, and long-term commitment are essential for the success of collaborative conservation efforts.

Virtual Repatriation

Virtual repatriation involves creating digital reproductions or virtual representations of cultural artifacts and returning them to communities of origin. It offers increased accessibility, education, and engagement with the cultural heritage. Virtual representations can be experienced remotely, providing opportunities for research, learning, and cultural revitalization. While virtual repatriation widens access to cultural artifacts, it is important to recognize its limitations. Virtual experiences cannot fully replace the tangible and emotional connections that come with direct access to the original artifacts. Therefore, virtual repatriation should be seen as a complementary tool to physical repatriation, offering additional avenues for education and engagement with cultural heritage.

Capacity Building and Training

Capacity building and training focus on equipping communities with the necessary skills and knowledge to actively participate in the restoration and preservation of their cultural artifacts. By providing training in conservation techniques, traditional craftsmanship, and documentation, communities can take ownership of the restoration process and ensure its sustainability. Capacity building empowers communities to become custodians of their cultural heritage, fostering self-sufficiency, pride, and intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. However, successful capacity building requires long-term commitment, ongoing support, and access to resources and expertise. Collaboration between external conservation professionals and the community is crucial for effective capacity building.

Exhibitions and Loan Programs

Exhibitions and loan programs involve temporarily displaying or loaning cultural artifacts to communities of origin. This approach allows direct engagement, cultural revitalization, education, and community connection with their heritage. Exhibitions and loan programs provide valuable opportunities for communities to experience and learn from the artifacts in their original context. They facilitate cultural revitalization, fostering a sense of pride and connection to cultural heritage. However, careful consideration must be given to the terms of the loan, including security, preservation, and respect for the integrity of the artifacts. Clear agreements and collaboration between custodian institutions and communities are crucial for the success of loan programs.

Custodianship and Responsibilities of Museums

Museums, in their role as custodians, are charged with the important task of preserving and exhibiting cultural art. These institutions bear the responsibility of safeguarding these objects for both current and future generations to appreciate and understand. Moreover, museums hold a substantial influence over public perception of our collective heritage, making them central figures in facilitating dialogue among diverse communities.

Renowned establishments like the Louvre in Paris or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York house extensive collections of foreign cultural art. Through meticulously curated exhibitions, they have the ability to introduce audiences from all corners of the globe to the astounding beauty and historical significance encapsulated within these relics. Nevertheless, it is essential that museums remain cognizant of their ethical obligations pertaining to obtaining these items ethically through proper acquisition methods and ensuring meticulous documentation practices are adhered to at all times throughout an artifact's lifespan, while providing optimum care for its preservation.

The British Museum, as a custodian of vast cultural collections, has the responsibility of preserving, researching, and displaying cultural artifacts from around the world. Its custodianship involves ensuring the physical integrity and security of the objects under its care. The museum's responsibilities include the long-term preservation of artifacts, conducting scholarly research, providing public access to the collections through exhibitions and educational programs, adhering to ethical standards, and engaging in international collaborations. However, the museum's practices and stance on the restitution of cultural artifacts have been subjects of debate and critique. The museum continues to navigate discussions and initiatives related to provenance, ownership, and the presentation of its collections in a global context.

To neglect any aspect relating to how an item enters into a museum collection would be tantamount to defying moral principles upheld by society at large, as it could be perceived as illegal or unjust acquirement. The act of illegally or unjustly acquiring cultural art can cause irreparable damage not only internally within communities tied to those objects but on an international level as well. Therefore, institutions must operate transparently when acquiring new pieces—verifying provenance beyond reasonable doubt—since this transparency helps

combat illicit trade and instill trust among artists' communities', source countries', and other stakeholders alike.

Provenance Research and Acquisition Practices

In tackling the matter concerning ownership and possession of foreign cultural art, provenance research serves a pivotal function. It encompasses tracing the ownership history and documenting the journey of cultural art. To ensure that they possess items legitimately and have knowledge about its origin, museums should engage in meticulous research. Obtaining objects with proper documentation and informed consent is crucial for transparent and responsible stewardship, making ethical acquisition practices essential.

Through its ill-fated acquisition, The Getty Museum learned firsthand about why conducting proper provenance research is so crucial. In the 1980s, it was believed that a Greek original had been obtained by the museum in this statue. Yet, further inquiries disclosed that the sculpture was unlawfully unearthed and shipped out of Italy. The significance of conducting thorough provenance research and practicing ethical acquisition practices was highlighted when the museum ultimately returned the statue to Italy.

Transparency and Collaboration with Source Communities

Museums are increasingly recognizing the need for transparency and collaboration with source communities. Involving communities in decision-making processes, developing repatriation policies, and engaging in dialogue are crucial steps toward addressing the ownership and possession of foreign cultural art. Collaborative approaches foster mutual respect, shared knowledge, and the revitalization of cultural practices.

The Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford has implemented innovative approaches to engage with source communities. They have established partnerships with indigenous groups, such as the Sámi people⁴ of northern Europe, to co-curate exhibitions and repatriate objects of cultural significance.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Greece

Ownership and possession issues surrounding foreign cultural art have been actively addressed by Greece, particularly concerning the Parthenon Marbles. The Elgin Marbles or ancient marble sculptures were requested by Greece from London's British Museum in 2002⁵. Greece maintains that the sculptures were taken without proper consent or legal documentation and require being returned to their country of origin. The country argues that the Parthenon

⁴ "Regional Overview: Europe." www.prm.ox.ac.uk, www.prm.ox.ac.uk/regional-overview-europe.

⁵ "The Parthenon Marbles." www.greece.org, www.greece.org/parthenon/marbles/.

Marbles are a crucial aspect of their cultural tradition, denoting a remarkable phase in the history and artistic feats of ancient Greece. The reunion of the marbles and restoration of their historical and cultural context depend on their return. The dedication of Greece towards protecting and preserving their cultural heritage can be seen through their consistent efforts in securing the return of the Parthenon Marbles.

Egypt

The issue of foreign cultural art ownership and possession was significantly affected by Egypt. Particularly notable are its archaeological treasures and rich ancient history. A significant event was Napoleon's army discovering the Rosetta Stone in 1799⁶. Deciphering ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs was made possible by the Rosetta Stone, which is a stele inscribed with a decree in three script: Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic script, and Ancient Greek. It contributed to discovering the puzzles of ancient Egypt. The revelation stimulated international fascination towards artifacts from Egypt and aided in the worldwide acknowledgement of Egypt's cultural inheritance. In order to prevent unscrupulous trading in cultural artifacts, measures were adopted by Egypt's government while they also asked that stolen treasures be given back. It is suggested that exhibiting and conserving these artifacts in their original location promotes the chance for Egyptians to connect with their olden days while encouraging cultural comprehension amongst upcoming generations.

Peru

Ownership and possession matters related to foreign cultural art have seen active involvement from Peru, especially concerning its rich indigenous heritage and archaeological treasures. Significant loss of cultural artifacts in the country is due to pillaging, illegal excavation and illicit trade. Measures taken by Peru to address this issue include establishing specialized units within its law enforcement agencies to combat the smuggling and trafficking of cultural artifacts. Moreover, Peru has engaged in international collaborations and negotiations with museums and countries to retrieve its looted cultural treasures, underscoring the value of their restitution for upholding its cultural identity and historical legacy. While the success of these attempts varies case by case, Peru has achieved some notable successes in repatriating cultural artifacts. One prominent example is the successful repatriation of thousands of artifacts from the Machu Picchu site. In 2011, Yale University returned over 5,000 archaeological objects⁷, including ceramics, metalwork, and human remains, that were taken from Machu Picchu by American

⁶ ““Act of Plunder”: Egyptians Want the Rosetta Stone Back.” *Aljazeera*, 30 November 2022, www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/30/after-220-years-egypt-demands-the-return-of-the-rosetta-stone.

⁷ “Yale Agrees to Return Machu Picchu Artefacts to Peru.” *BBC News*, 12 February 2011, www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-12438695.

explorer Hiram Bingham in the early 20th century. Peru has also engaged in negotiations with other countries and museums, seeking the return of looted cultural treasures.

United Kingdom

Foreign cultural art's ownership and possession have been significantly influenced by the United Kingdom's involvement. The reason behind this is mainly its colonial history and extensive museum collections, which has led to significant claims against the British Museum. These claims include demands from Egypt for the return of the Rosetta Stone, Nigeria for the Benin Bronzes, and Greece for the repatriation of the Elgin Marbles. From the British perspective, the British Museum argues that their acquisition of these artifacts was lawful and that their extensive collection provides worldwide access and educational opportunities. They argue that the actions of Lord Elgin and the extensive collection of the museum contribute to comparative studies and a broader understanding of world civilizations. Critics, however, contend that retaining these artifacts diminishes the cultural heritage of the countries of origin and perpetuates a legacy of colonialism.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO maintains the World Heritage List to identify and safeguard sites of exceptional universal value, which includes cultural properties. Preserving cultural heritage is important worldwide; thus, UNESCO's programs seek to foster international collaboration while also raising public awareness through its various initiatives. The aim of these undertakings is to address the complex matters related to owning and possessing foreign cultural art. An improved comprehension towards preserving and appreciating diverse cultures' artifacts, which play a vital role in shaping our shared human history, has been promoted by this organization. Its efforts have helped set guidelines for illegal art trafficking and exportation.

International Council of Museums (ICOM)

Playing a vital role in addressing the possession and ownership rights to foreign cultural art makes ICOM an essential global organization⁸. ICOM, committed to promoting and protecting museums and their collections worldwide, was established in 1946. The council additionally supports provenance research, documentation and responsible acquisition practices in museums. The exchange of ideas between museums, cultural institutions, and industry professionals is encouraged by ICOM through their international conferences, publications, and opportunities to network.

⁸ "ICOM." *International Council of Museums (ICOM)*, 2019, icom.museum/en/.

International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

ICOMOS is an important global organization devoted to safeguarding and conserving cultural heritage sites and monuments across the world. The promotion of cultural heritage's significance and guaranteeing preservation for future generations are critical roles played by it. Regarding built heritage, the council is crucial in discussing the ownership and possession of foreign cultural art. While ICOM deals with museums and their collections, ICOMOS deals with the physical sites and structures themselves, in order to maintain appropriate preservation and stewardship of cultural sites globally. ICOMOS offers expert advice on conservation practices through conducting relevant research work while promoting international collaboration. By means of its diverse committees and working groups ICOMOS fosters discussion amongst experts, academics as well as individuals actively involved with conserving cultural heritage. Discussions about ownership and possession of foreign cultural art are significantly influenced by its contributions in understanding, as well as, safeguarding historical or culturally important places.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
14 November 1970	Adoption of the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property ⁹
16 November 1972	Adoption of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, which establishes the World Heritage List to identify and protect sites of outstanding universal value
14 December 1973	UN General Assembly passed resolution 3187 (XXVIII), titled "Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict."
11 December 1978	The UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in

⁹ UNESCO. "Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property." *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)*, 1970, en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and.

	case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP) was established
1982	Establishment of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics for Museums
4 November 1986	The ICOM Code of Professional Ethics was adopted unanimously by the 15th General Assembly of ICOM in Buenos Aires
1st July 1998	UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects takes place.
14 February 2002	Greece officially requests the return of the Parthenon Marbles from the British Museum, which sparks a renewed debate on the repatriation of cultural artifacts
13 September 2007	Adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples ¹⁰ , recognizing the rights of indigenous communities to maintain, control, and protect their cultural heritage
2009	Formation of the European Parliament's Working Group on the Return of Cultural Property, aiming to address issues related to the restitution of cultural artifacts
2014	Launch of the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH) ¹¹ , an organization dedicated to safeguarding cultural heritage threatened by armed conflicts

¹⁰ United Nations. "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples." *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 909–921, 13 September 2007, www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2011.0040>.

¹¹ "Aliph Foundation - Protecting Heritage to Build Peace." *Aliph Foundation*, www.aliph-foundation.org/.

27 March 2015	UNESCO's Unite4Heritage Campaign was launched
24 March 2017	UN Security Council Resolution 2347 was passed
2019	Formation of the African Restitution Committee, established by African nations to advocate for the return of looted cultural artifacts from former colonial powers

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

UN General Assembly Resolution 3187 (XXVIII) - Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1973)¹²

Protecting cultural property during armed conflicts is highlighted as important in the resolution adopted on December 14, 1973. Cultural heritage preservation is stressed with an emphasis on respecting and safeguarding museums, monuments, and archaeological sites. Humanity's cultural identity and collective memory are greatly influenced by them. Theft, destruction or illicit trading in cultural objects should be prevented by states during times of conflict as states in this resolution. It created international standards and frameworks for protecting cultural property, leading to the development of subsequent conventions and protocols. The resolution also increased global awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the severe consequences of its destruction in times of war. However, the resolution faces challenges in implementation. Its effectiveness relies on individual states' willingness and capacity to enforce protection measures, which can be hampered by limited resources, lack of expertise, and political instability in conflict zones. Consequently, deliberate targeting and destruction of cultural property have occurred in recent conflicts. Nevertheless, some positive steps have been taken in response to the resolution. Initiatives like UNESCO's Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage program and the prosecution of individuals for cultural property destruction in Mali by the International Criminal Court demonstrate tangible efforts to preserve cultural heritage.

UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (1995)¹³

¹² Session 1973-1977, UN General Assembly (28th. "Restitution of Works of Art to Countries Victims of Appropriation." *United Nations Digital Library*, 1974, digitallibrary.un.org/record/190996. Accessed 25 June 2023.

¹³ Prott, Lyndel. "The UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects – Ten Years On." *Uniform Law Review*, vol. 14, no. 1-2, pp. 215–237, 1 January 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ulr/14.1-2.215>.

This convention targets the illegal trading activities associated with cultural artifacts and has been enforceable since July 1st, 1998. The promotion of restitution for stolen cultural artifacts back to their countries is one objective behind providing principles that encourage international collaboration in identifying and recovering such items. The convention emphasizes on conducting proper research to ensure legitimacy of provenance while acquiring cultural objects. Preventing the circulation of stolen or illegally exported cultural artifacts in the international market is its goal. Despite its positive impact, the Convention faces certain limitations and challenges. Not all countries are party to the Convention, which hampers its universal application. Additionally, the enforcement of the Convention's provisions depends on the willingness and capacity of states to implement them effectively.

UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP)

The promotion for returning or restituting cultural property to their countries of origin when there is illicit appropriation is what this committee established back in 1978 aims for. Cooperation and dialogue are promoted among member states through its platform. A venue is supplied to discuss issues linked to the return of cultural objects. The committee's close collaboration with UNESCO and member states facilitates dispute resolution related to cultural property while encouraging international cooperation. However, its decisions and recommendations are non-binding, relying on the voluntary cooperation and compliance of member states and relevant institutions. Disputes over ownership and legal complexities often arise, making the resolution of cases challenging and time-consuming. Conflicting claims and differing interpretations of national laws further complicate the process. Additionally, the Committee's scope is limited to cases of illicit appropriation, and it may not have jurisdiction or authority to address broader issues related to cultural heritage preservation, protection, and repatriation. Furthermore, financial and logistical constraints can hinder the Committee's ability to provide the necessary resources and support for effective restitution efforts.

UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property

With the objective to prevent illicit trading activities surrounding cultural artifacts, an international agreement was reached and ratified by multiple nations back in 1970. It promotes international cooperation in safeguarding cultural heritage by establishing guidelines. The return of cultural property stolen or illegally exported to its country of origin is required. Varying levels of resources, capacity, and political will among countries can hinder effective implementation. Additionally, the Convention lacks direct enforcement mechanisms and relies on member states to enact and enforce appropriate legislation, which can result in gaps and inconsistencies in legal frameworks.

UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017)¹⁴

The significance of safeguarding cultural heritage from damage during times of conflict is emphasized in this resolution adopted on March 24th, 2017. The link between terrorism funding and cultural heritage destruction is also highlighted. To counter terrorism and prevent the illicit trade of cultural artifacts, protecting cultural heritage is stressed as an important measure. The resolution appeals to member states to fortify legal systems, improve international collaboration, and promote efforts geared towards shielding and maintaining cultural heritage. Enforcement relies on the capacity of individual states, and resource limitations, political instability, and competing priorities during conflicts can hinder effective implementation.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

UNESCO's Unite4Heritage Campaign

Launched in 2015, the campaign seeks to protect and promote cultural heritage around the world. Raises awareness of the importance of protecting cultural sites and resources, especially those at risk from armed conflict, terrorism and illicit trade. The campaign emphasizes the importance of international cooperation and local independence emphasize the preservation of cultural heritage. While it does not directly address ownership and possession issues of foreign cultural art, the campaign emphasizes education, capacity building, and emergency response to support cultural heritage preservation. Its effectiveness lies in creating a positive environment for dialogue and cooperation, but addressing ownership and possession challenges requires complementary efforts such as legal frameworks, restitution policies, and ethical acquisition practices. The long-term impact depends on concrete actions and comprehensive solutions to ownership and possession issues in cultural heritage preservation

International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics for Museums

Established in 1986, ICOM developed a Code of Ethics that provides guidelines for museum ethics in the acquisition, ownership and display of cultural objects. The Code emphasizes the responsibility of use, respect for cultural diversity and the importance of provenance research to ensure transparency and accountability. It emphasizes due diligence in acquisition, encourages dialogue and collaboration, and recognizes the importance of repatriation and restitution. Its effectiveness lies in shaping professional standards, fostering dialogue, and raising awareness about ethical considerations. However, implementation depends on individual museums, and challenges remain in enforcement and international cooperation. Continued adherence to the Code, along with strengthened mechanisms and

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council. "S/RES/2347 (2017)" *United Nations Security Council, 2017*, www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2347-%282017%29.

cooperation, can enhance its impact on addressing ownership and possession issues in the museum sector.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Cultural Heritage Exchange Programs

Cultural heritage exchange programs can be established through collaborations between museums and institutions from different countries. Under this program, museums or institutions in possession of foreign cultural art could enter into partnerships or agreements with the source countries or communities. Instead of complete repatriation, the art would be "temporarily entrusted" to the care of the partnering institution, allowing people to experience and learn about foreign cultural heritage firsthand. This approach promotes cultural understanding, encourages mutual respect, and encourages intercultural dialogue. Nonetheless, concerns about the safekeeping and potential damage to the borrowed artifacts may arise. Additionally, disputes over ownership and repatriation may still persist. Cultural heritage exchange programs have the potential to enhance cultural appreciation and foster dialogue, promoting a more inclusive approach to cultural artifacts. However, they should be implemented with careful consideration of security, legal frameworks, and ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and respectful handling of the borrowed artifacts.

Community-Based Cultural Preservation Projects

Local communities can actively participate in the preservation and stewardship of their cultural artifacts. This can involve training community members in artifact conservation techniques, establishing community museums, or organizing cultural festivals and events that celebrate traditional practices. Empowering communities to preserve their own cultural heritage nurtures a sense of ownership and pride. It strengthens cultural identity, promotes intergenerational knowledge transfer, and encourages sustainable practices. It also allows for a more diverse range of perspectives in the interpretation and preservation of artifacts. Limited resources and funding may pose challenges to community-based projects. Ensuring proper training and expertise in artifact preservation is essential to avoid unintentional damage. Community-based cultural preservation projects have the potential to empower local communities, promote cultural resilience, and ensure the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. However, support from government agencies, institutions, and sustainable funding mechanisms is crucial for their long-term success.

Cultural Diplomacy and International Collaborations

Countries can create partnerships to jointly manage and curate cultural artifacts. This can involve collaborative research projects, knowledge exchange programs, and joint exhibitions that

highlight the cultural heritage of different nations. They facilitate the sharing of expertise, resources, and technologies for artifact preservation. Collaborative exhibitions provide opportunities for diverse cultural perspectives to be showcased and appreciated. However, negotiating agreements and collaborations between countries may involve complex diplomatic processes and differing national priorities. Cultural diplomacy and international collaborations have the potential to bridge cultural divides and foster a more inclusive approach to cultural heritage. By working together, countries can pool resources and expertise, contributing to the preservation, research, and accessibility of cultural artifacts. Ongoing dialogue and negotiation are necessary to address ownership disputes and ensure equitable collaborations.

Digital Cultural Heritage Exchange Platform

The Digital Cultural Heritage Exchange Platform proposes the creation of a global digital repository where museums and institutions collaborate with source countries or communities to share accurate digital replicas of cultural objects. By providing a virtual space for the sharing of digital replicas, it allows a wider audience to explore and appreciate cultural heritage from around the world. This promotes cultural exchange, encourages educational initiatives, and facilitates research collaborations, ultimately deepening our understanding and respect for diverse cultures. One of the key strengths of the platform lies in its potential to mitigate challenges associated with physical possession and ownership disputes. By focusing on digital replicas, it provides an opportunity for source countries or communities to regain a sense of connection and ownership over their cultural heritage. Museums and institutions can collaborate with these stakeholders to create accurate digital representations of cultural objects, which can then be shared on the platform. However, technological considerations, such as high-quality imaging techniques and robust data security measures, are crucial for ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the digital replicas. Intellectual property rights and cultural sensitivities must also be carefully considered to ensure appropriate use and access to the digital content. Furthermore, the success of the platform depends on the active participation and collaboration of museums, institutions, and source countries or communities. Adequate resources, support, and capacity-building initiatives will be necessary to encourage widespread engagement and maximize the platform's impact.

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