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**Edited by James Cuno: Whose Culture?**

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# Introduction

James Cuno

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

**W**<sub>HOSE CULTURE?</sub> The modern nations' within whose borders antiquities—the ancient artifacts of peoples long disappeared—happen to have been found? Or the world's peoples', heirs to antiquity as the foundation of culture that has never known political borders but has always been fluid, mongrel, made from contact with new, strange, and wonderful things?

*The Promise of Museums.* As a repository of objects, dedicated to the promotion of tolerance and inquiry and the dissipation of ignorance, where the artifacts of one culture and one time are preserved and displayed next to those of other cultures and times without prejudice.

*The Debate over Antiquities.* (Nationalism) Antiquities are the cultural property of the nation, products of the collective genius of its nationals, important to their identity and self-esteem. They are of the nation and cannot be alienated from it. (Archaeologists) Antiquities are ancient artifacts of meaning only if properly excavated. The acquisition by museums of antiquities not properly excavated, whose archaeological circumstances are unknown, aids and abets the looting of antiquities and the destruction of archaeological sites and the knowledge they contain. (Museums) Antiquities, documented or otherwise, have a variety of meanings and deserve to be preserved in the public domain for the benefit of scholars and the delight of the public.

For decades, art museum directors and curators, archaeologists, and government authorities have been locked in a debate over the value of museums

and the acquisition of antiquities. The issues are numerous. In a recent book, I examined the history and implications of nationalist retentionist cultural property laws intent on prohibiting the international movement in antiquities. There I argued that such laws and related international conventions, although said to be intended to protect the archaeological record by outlawing looting of archaeological sites and the unregulated trade in antiquities, serve instead to support a state's nationalist political agenda: its claim on cultural continuity since antiquity—Egypt since the time of the Pharaohs, Iraq since Mesopotamia, Italy since Rome and Etruria, the People's Republic of China since the Qin Dynasty, Turkey since the Hittites, and so on—and thus a particular modern nation's sense of its own importance and uniqueness in the world; archaeology and antiquities at the service of modern nationalist identity politics.<sup>1</sup>

In this book, leading museum directors, curators, and university-based scholars defend the proposition that museums have value as a repository of objects dedicated to their preservation, the dissemination of knowledge, and the dissolution of ignorance. It is also proposed that such objects, even those ancient ones whose archaeological context and/or provenance (recent record of ownership) are unknown have much to teach us about the past, about art, about material properties and manufacture, about human aspirations, and about distant cultures and times, all of which have relevance to the times in which we live currently. In this respect, the acquisition, preservation, presentation, and publication of these objects—excavated or not, with or without provenance—is the museum's highest purpose.

Many in the archaeological establishment argue to the contrary: without knowledge of an antiquity's archaeological context it is meaningless, "just another pretty thing" as one often hears said dismissively. (The newsletter of the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre of University of Cambridge's McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research is titled simply, and pointedly, "Culture Without Context.") Archaeologists want to know precisely where an antiquity was found in order to understand how it was used. Context is everything for archaeologists, and only archaeological context matters. That an antiquity's archaeological context is but one of its

many contexts—and not even its *original* context—is not considered. That is, the many different ways an antiquity was used and changed hands in different circumstances before it was buried comprise each a separate context. And then the numerous ways in which it was used and housed subsequently—as *spolia* in the construction of walls and roads, as modified for different domestic purposes, as a collectible held privately or acquired by a public museum where its display among other objects may provoke scholarly reinterpretation or an aesthetic response—are also each a separate context.

But of course the archaeological context is, like any other, important, and anything that causes its destruction should be discouraged. Museums and archaeologists agree on this. The question however is how best to protect the archaeological context while also preserving antiquities whose contexts are unknown. Archaeological contexts are destroyed by acts of warfare, natural disaster, economic development, looting, pillaging, and accident. Of these, most attention has been focused on looting and its prevention.

Why focus on looting? Because it is believed possible to stop it. Nation-states are willing allies in this effort. They want to keep antiquities within their legal jurisdiction because they are valued for their contributions to archaeology, are vitally important to the economics of cultural tourism, are thought to enhance their citizens' national self-esteem, and advance their national political agendas. For all these reasons, they enact ownership and export laws to criminalize looting and join in bilateral treaties and international conventions seeking other nations' support to protect antiquities as a particular modern nation's cultural property.

Archaeologists hold that looting is caused by the market in antiquities, and the degree to which museums participate in the market, either by acquiring antiquities directly from or indirectly as gifts from private collectors, they are said to be encouraging looting and the destruction of the archaeological context. Archaeologists argue that museums should never acquire unexcavated antiquities whose recent history of ownership is not known. These are said certainly to have been looted, torn from their archaeological context. What then should happen to these objects? They do not say. All that such objects could teach us about the past is

lost or ignored. All the reasons they should be preserved in the public domain are left unconsidered. Instead, unexcavated and undocumented antiquities are sacrificed to the stated higher good of discouraging looting and trying to protect archaeological sites. And still archaeological sites are looted and archaeological context is lost to natural disaster, economic development, and warfare.

Museums are concerned with both the fate of the individual antiquity and the preservation of archaeological context. To this end, most museums in the developed world (the so-called art importing countries) have developed acquisition policies intended to remove incentives for looting archaeological sites. First, museums abide by all applicable national and international laws, bilateral agreements, and international conventions. And second, museums are encouraged to set a date before which an antiquity must be known to have been out of its likely country of origin before it can be acquired. These dates vary. For some museums, it is the date of the adoption of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.<sup>2</sup> For others it is the date of their national government's legislative implementation of the terms of the Convention (in the United States, this would be 1983; in France, for example, it is 1997). And for still others, it is simply a date judged sufficiently distant so as not to encourage the looting of archaeological sites: the further back the date, the longer a looter and his art-dealing accomplices would have to hold an object before profiting from its sale. U.S. art museums choose different dates. Some use 1970, others 1983, and others a rolling ten-year date. The latter is the recent suggested minimum proposed by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), a group comprising directors of the largest art museums in North America. Recently AAMD revisited this proposed minimum and set a fixed date (or "bright line" as it is called) of 1970, with allowance for exceptions for important objects that otherwise couldn't be acquired, resulting in the loss of benefits cited above.<sup>3</sup> But of course only a complete ban on the acquisition of undocumented antiquities will discourage looting. Any date other than today is a political compromise. And still archaeological sites will be destroyed by natural disaster, economic development, and warfare.

In any case, museums want to develop policies and practices that preserve undocumented antiquities and reasonably protect archaeological sites. Museums value the discrete object for all that can be learned from it and from seeing it among other objects from different cultures in the context of the museum's galleries. Unlike the archaeological establishment, museums do not believe that unexcavated antiquities—whose archaeological context has not been scientifically recorded, or which didn't come from an ancient archaeological context—are meaningless. Numerous examples of such “orphaned” antiquities can be cited; some are cited in this volume. Two additional examples are offered here.

The sublime Hellenistic sculptural group known as the *Laocoön* was found in Rome on January 14, 1506 (fig. I.1).<sup>4</sup> We know a lot about the circumstances of its finding. We know that a farmer digging in his vineyard on the Esquiline Hill found it accidentally (we even know the name of the farmer: Felice de' Freddi). We know that the architect and antiquarian Giuliano da Sangallo was called to view it and brought along Michelangelo. We also know that both men pronounced it the work described by Pliny as having once belonged to the Emperor Titus; Michelangelo is also said to have called it “a singular miracle of art.” Yet we do not know precisely where it was found. That is, we do not know the *archaeological* circumstances of its find spot, with what other objects it was found, or at which stratum of its “site.” The work was not excavated as we think of excavations today. It was found centuries before the development of archaeology as a science. It was not removed from the earth through stratigraphic excavation. It was simply dug up, “ripped” from its context as some might say today, found by accident, removed from the ground, taken away, acquired by Pope Julius II, and installed in the Vatican's Bevedere Statue Court with other antiquities.

By any measure even unexcavated the *Laocoön* is important for our understanding of Greek art, of the importance of Rome within the Mediterranean world, of the beauty and power of dramatic composition and expressive form, of the potential of working in marble, and surely, perhaps most importantly, of the history of taste. We know, for example, that it was immediately influential among humanists and artists.<sup>5</sup> It was engraved as early as 1509, used as a source by Raphael for his head of Homer



Fig. I.1. *Laocoön*, 1st century bc. Roman copy, perhaps after Agesander, Athenodorus, and Polydorus of Rhodes. White marble (h. 95 in.). Museo Pio Clementino Vatican Museums, Vatican State. Photograph © Archive Timothy McCarthy/Art Resource, NY.

in the *Parnassus* of 1511, copied in marble by Baccio Bandinelli in 1520, and reproduced in bronze under the direction of Primaticcio for the French king, Francis I. In about 1510 Bramante had four of Rome's leading sculptors copy it in large wax models. Raphael, who would later be appointed Commissioner of the Antiquities of Rome, judged Sansovino's copy the finest and it was cast in bronze and given as a gift to Cardinal Grimani before eventually ending up in France, itself. (The *Laocoön* would also go to France, briefly, as Napoleonic war booty.)

And in much of this, the *Laocoön* was not alone. From at least the early fifteenth century, antiquities were prized by Roman and Florentine private collectors, papal, ducal, and otherwise aristocratic. Pope Sixtus IV (1471–84) even donated his private collection “to the Roman people” for display near the papal palace. Other European courts followed suit and over the course of succeeding centuries plaster casts and prints of ancient works of art were the staple of courtly libraries.<sup>6</sup> It was in Dresden in the mid-eighteenth century that Winckelmann was inspired to write his seminal pamphlet of 1755, “Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture.” There he wrote of the *Laocoön* as emblematic of expressive restraint in Greek sculpture, which he explained was related to similar devices in Greek literature (he thought the *Laocoön*'s emotion derived from a scene in Virgil's *Aeneid*). This in turn inspired Lessing to respond in an essay of his own, “From *Laocoön*, On the Limitations of Painting and Poetry” (1766), by arguing that the aesthetic value of sculpture lay more in its plastic dimensions and our spatial and psychological experience of them than on any reliance on literary sources or devices. The effect of these and other essays of the latter eighteenth century was to inspire a shift in European artistic taste toward a new and *modern* style inspired by antiquity. Indeed, the role played by antiquity, and of specific *unexcavated* and accidentally found (what today we would often call *looted*) antiquities, in inspiring the forging of new artistic styles in European culture is a commonplace. As Francis Haskell has written: “To study the history of attitudes to ancient art would be to study the history of European culture as a whole.”<sup>7</sup>

Can it then be said that the *Laocoön* is in any way meaningless without our knowing the archaeological circumstances of its finding? Of course



not. And yet many archaeologist critics of museums would argue precisely this with regard to unexcavated and undocumented antiquities today. They would hold that without knowledge of its archaeological context an antiquity—like the *Laocoön*—is just a pretty object valued only for its *aesthetic* qualities, which they claim to be subjective and personal, unscientific, and of little general importance. And they would discourage museums from acquiring it and other “orphaned” objects similarly found alienated from their points of origin.

And what of antiquities with texts on them? Undoubtedly the most important example of an unexcavated object with text is the Rosetta Stone, now housed in the British Museum (fig. 1.2). It is thought to have lain for centuries in its temple, perhaps in the city of Sais or elsewhere in the Nile Delta.<sup>8</sup> But at some point a fragment of it was taken and used as building material and through a series of events may have reached the city of Rosetta by the fifteenth century when it was used in the walls of a fort. It lay buried in the ruins of the fort for yet more centuries until the summer of 1799, when the French rebuilt the structure as part of their efforts to secure the Egyptian coastline against the British. (Once again, we know the name of the person who found the antiquity: Pierre François-Xavier Bouchard, a French officer of engineers.) Sensing that the stone was important, French officers sent it to the Institut d’Égypte in Cairo, where it remained until it fell into the hands of the British, who removed it to London in 1802, since which it has never left Britain.

The text inscribed on its surface is in three scripts: Egyptian hieroglyphs (“the writing of the divine words”), Egyptian demotic (“the writing of documents”), and ancient Greek (“the writing of the Ionians”).<sup>9</sup> It documents the terms of an agreement between a synod of Egyptian priests and the Macedonian ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy V, on March 27, 196 BC and accounts for the generosity of the king (the latest manifestation of the ideal Pharaoh); his gifts to the temples; support for the troops; cutting of taxes; and completion of Alexandria, its library, and the Pharos lighthouse. It acknowledges that the priests agreed to commission a number of statues of the king, one of each to be placed in every temple, some even in the holiest of sacred places with images of the gods worshipped there. And it promises that a copy of the text in the three languages would be placed in

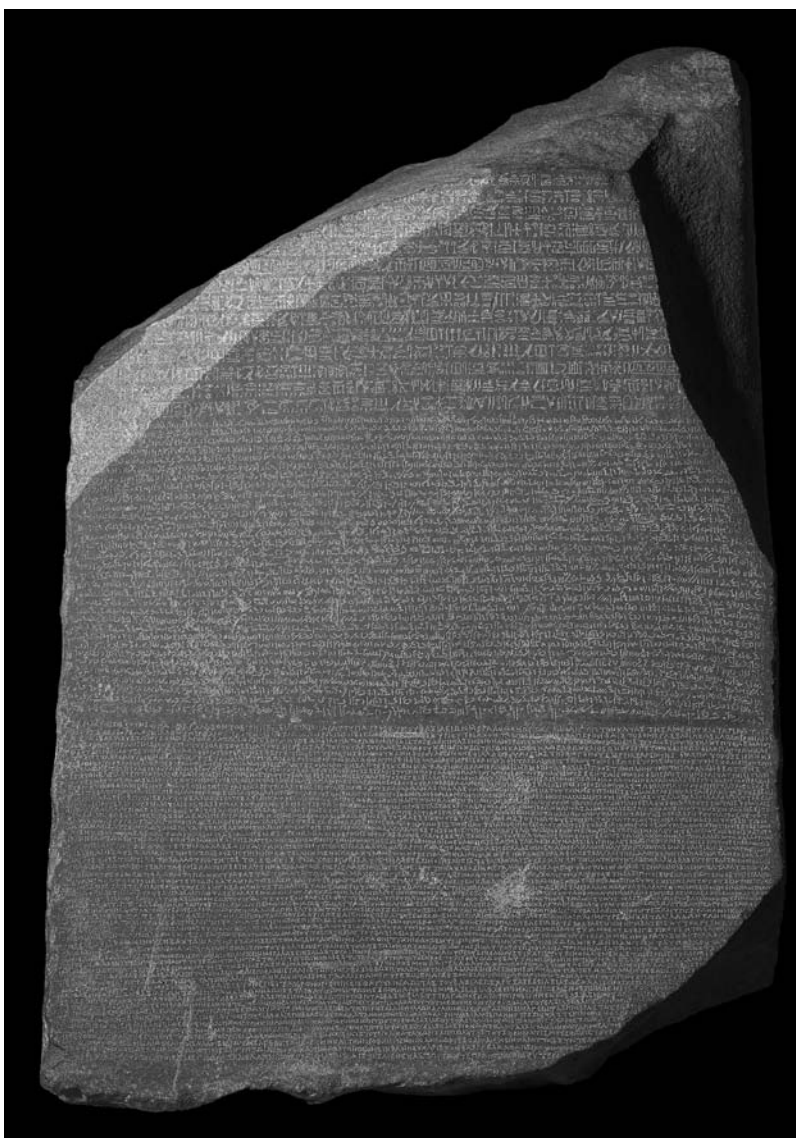


Fig. I.2. Rosetta Stone, Ptolemaic Period, 196 BC. Egypt. Granodiorite stone (h. 45 in., w. 28 1/2 in.). The British Museum, Gift of George III. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

every temple of the first, second, and third division in the land “alongside the statue of the king who lives for ever.” (The statue itself was to be called “Ptolemy who has guarded the Radiant Land” or “Ptolemy who has saved Egypt”.) In its content, the Rosetta Stone is important. But in this, it is not unique. Other Egyptian texts of equal or greater importance exist. And there are even other copies of the stone’s text, the so-called Decree of Memphis. No, the importance of the Rosetta Stone lies in its being deciphered. It unlocked the door to the ancient Egyptian language and allowed for the writing of the history of that ancient land. As John Ray has written, “It is the creator of the entire *Historie* of ancient Egypt, because it has enabled us to read the texts which led us to start writing that history.”<sup>10</sup>

Does it matter that it had no archaeological context when it was found? Its known find spot cannot tell us anything about ancient Egypt (and its point of origin cannot be known for certain). It can only tell us about the rebuilding of older forts by the French under the constant threat of the British, whose navy under Nelson had destroyed Napoleon’s fleet at the Battle of the Nile a year earlier. Those are the true physical circumstances of the stone’s discovery. Its importance to our knowledge of ancient Egypt lay not at all in its archaeological context but solely in its text, and then not in the content of its text but in the relations between the text’s languages. The practice of Egyptian archaeology is only meaningful today because of our knowledge of Egypt’s history as made possible by an unexcavated antiquity that has been housed and studied in a British museum for over two hundred years.

The state of affairs in archaeology today, as reported in David Owen’s contribution to this volume, is that if the Rosetta Stone were to come onto the art market with no known provenance (no knowledge of its finding circumstances, whether or not they were “archaeological”), archaeology’s leading English-language journals would not publish its text. Those of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) have policies against serving “as the initial place of publication or pronouncement of any object acquired by an individual or institution after 30 December 1970” unless “the object was in a collection existing prior to 30 December 1970, or if it has been legally exported from the country of origin.”<sup>11</sup> The 1973 policy of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) does not permit the initial

presentation or publication of “any object in a public or private collection acquired after December 1973, unless its existence can be documented prior to that date, or if it was legally exported from the country of origin.” In 2004, in response to the Iraq war, AIA revised its policy to allow for an exception if, in the words of the publication policy, “in the view of the Editor, the aim of publication is to emphasize the loss of archaeological context.” No exception can be made simply because of the scholarly value of the object; only if “one remind[s] us all of how much information and value is lost when an object is illegally removed from its archaeological context.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, AIA’s Principles for Museum Acquisitions of Antiquities urge museums “to specify a date before which an object must have been exported from its country of origin,” and it recommends either “the date of the relevant legislation governing ownership and export of antiquities in the country of origin or the date of 1970” when the UNESCO Convention was adopted (in the United States, 1983).<sup>13</sup> If the Rosetta Stone were to appear on the market today undocumented, the U.S. archaeological establishment would either not allow its publication and/or presentation at professional conferences or allow it only if, in the case of AIA, it was used to emphasize the loss to the archaeological context represented by unprovenanced antiquities. In either case, any attempt by a museum to acquire the Rosetta Stone for the benefit of scholars and the interested public would be opposed by ASOR and AIA.

The Rosetta Stone, like the *Laocoön*, is an antiquity without archaeological context. Neither antiquity was *excavated*, as we understand the term today. Both were found by accident, removed without scientific documentation, and acquired, one by a public museum and the other by a private collector (who subsequently created his own museum). In today’s terms, they are antiquities without context, of value for themselves, for what is integral to them and for the history of their reception over now some many centuries. And they continue to accrue value the longer they are in their museum settings, seen in splendid isolation as objects in themselves and as among other similar and dissimilar objects. Declaring them meaningless, as the current archaeologists’ position would have us do, is simply wrong.

They would also be suspect for having been removed from their place or origin (of course each had at least one earlier place of origin,

where it “originated” before being removed to the post where it was subsequently found). It is often argued that objects have greater meaning in their “original” context. They are said to be of greater importance when seen among other like objects from the same culture. National governments claim that they are of great importance to the identity and esteem of the modern nation—that they are *of* the modern nation and thus that the nation is incomplete without them. They argue for the return of such objects (as the Egyptian government has of the Rosetta Stone) on nationalist grounds. And they criticize the museums that hold these objects as instruments of foreign imperialism.

Like an earlier book also published by Princeton University Press, *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (2004), this book seeks to take stock of an important (arguably the most important or at least the most public) issue facing museums today.<sup>14</sup> The earlier book explored the public purpose of art museums—why their public values them and entrusts their directors and curators in building their collections and developing their exhibition and educational programs—at a time when so much that art museums were charged with doing was held in great suspicion: organizing exhibitions of contemporary art thought pornographic or sacrilegious to some; presenting exhibitions of private collections or designer objects as apparent quids pro quo for multi-million-dollar gifts; emphasizing the glamorous culture of beautiful and well-dressed wealthy people as perhaps the primary public of art museums; allegedly possessing works of art inappropriately, because they were really owned by victims of the Nazis who forcible took the works from their Jewish owners or because they were removed illegally from the jurisdiction of modern nations.

This book considers the question of why museums, especially art museums, should acquire antiquities, even unexcavated antiquities with incomplete provenance. In many ways, this book is a mate to the earlier one. The responsible acquisition of antiquities is something the public has entrusted our museums to do. It is part of the public’s trust in our museums. The public wants to know that we have considered all of the ethical and legal issues bearing on an acquisition of an ancient object

and that we are building our collections responsibly and for their benefit. They have become accustomed to reading about museums being challenged by foreign governments and archaeologists as acting irresponsibly and acquiring objects that likely or actually have been looted and/or removed illegally from “their” source countries. The governments of China, Italy, Greece, and Egypt have made claims against antiquities acquired long ago or recently by our museums and have called for their “return.” And some high-profile museums—the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the J. Paul Getty Museum; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; among others—have negotiated for the return of dozens of antiquities to Italy, where they are currently on display in Rome in an exhibition dramatically titled *Nostoi: Recovered Masterpieces* (*nostoi* referring to the lost epic relating the return home of Greek heroes after the Trojan War). And of course, the travails of the Getty Museum’s former curator of antiquities, Marion True, indicted for conspiring to acquire looted antiquities for the museum, has been covered widely in the international press. (Photographs of her wearing dark sunglasses and shielding her face with her pocketbook outside the Rome courtroom have appeared in newspapers around the world and continue to circulate in cyberspace on Web sites, blogs, and Listservs.)

It is the purpose of this book to challenge the perception of museums as rapacious acquirers of ill-gotten goods and to argue instead that our public museums build their antiquities collections responsibly and for the public’s benefit. Some readers will be disappointed that not “all sides” of the debate are presented here. It is our view that other books already do this and well enough that we needn’t repeat the “both sides of the argument” formula here.<sup>15</sup> And, perhaps more to the point, other books are partisan in opposition to the museum’s position as we are presenting it and need to be responded to.

To cite just one example, Colin Renfrew’s *Loot, Legitimacy, and Ownership* of 2000:

Crisis is not too strong a word to use when we speak of the predicament which today faces the historic heritage in nearly every country on earth. The world’s archaeological resource, which through the practice

of archaeology is our principal source of knowledge about the early human past, is being destroyed at a formidable and increasing rate. It is destroyed by looters in order to serve the lucrative market in illicit artifacts through which private collectors and, alas, some of the major museums of the world, fulfill their desire to accumulate antiquities. Such unprovenanced antiquities, ripped from their archaeological context without record (and without any hope of publication), can tell us little that is new. . . . All the major and ancient museums of the world have in earlier centuries obtained large parts of their collections by means that would today be considered dubious. . . . [It is an aim of this book] to invite museum curators to concede that they betray their trust as serious students of the past when they acquire unprovenanced antiquities or permit them to be displayed in their galleries.<sup>16</sup>

Renfrew is a distinguished archaeologist, director of the University of Cambridge's McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. (That said, he comes upon hard knocks in Sir John Boardman's contribution to this volume.) Renfrew values the contribution of his specialty above all others concerned with antiquities:

[Archaeology] gives primacy of place to information, to the knowledge of the human past which can come about through the study of those material remains. And for a century it has been appreciated that coherent information comes about only through the systematic study of context—of the associations of things found within the ground where they were abandoned or deliberately buried. The purpose of archaeological fieldwork today is the recovery, generally, through stratigraphic excavation, of the contexts of discovery, permitting interpretation of the economic, social and cognitive aspects of the diversity of cultures of the human past.<sup>17</sup>

He acknowledges that antiquities might also be art—"beautiful, interesting and evocative in their own right"—but separated from their context of discovery "they have very little potential to add to our knowledge of

the past.” Their value is simply ornamental, something to be admired, of some interest but of little *real* value.

It is the view of the authors of this book that antiquities (provenanced, and unprovenanced) in museums have value. To argue otherwise is to ignore the incalculable contributions made by museums over the years to our knowledge and appreciation of art, of different cultures, and of our common ancient past. The public trusts museums to make this case because the public benefits from contact with authentic artifacts of antiquity.

We must remember that we who work in public art museums work on behalf of the broad public interest in artistic artifacts. Some archaeologists dismiss art museums and art as being only of secondary value. Neil Brodie, for example, formerly Renfrew’s colleague at the University of Cambridge’s McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research and currently Director of Cultural Heritage Resource at Stanford University’s Archaeology Center, has written:

The art museum can be distinguished from other museums in that unlike a natural history or anthropology museum its purpose is not considered to be primarily educational; instead it is intended to allow contemplation of art in a space that is not cluttered with intrusive didactic aids. . . . The mission of the art museum was clearly stated in 1968 when the American Association of Museums published *America’s Museums: The Belmont Report*, which claimed that art museums “aim to provide the esthetic and emotional pleasure which great works of art offer.” This is a primary purpose of an art museum. It is assumed that a majority of the people who come regularly to our art museums come to be delighted, not to be taught, or preached at, or “improved” except by the works of art themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Brodie allows that “this distinction between the educational and the aesthetic purposes of museums may have blurred somewhat by the end of the twentieth century” (three decades after the *Belmont Report*), but he insists that it is still embedded in our art museum culture. And he dismisses the value of aesthetic purposes or the importance and relevance of being delighted by works of art. The public may value these purposes and



experiences, but he, a scholar archaeologist, does not. And more, he accepts the proposition (as fact) that art museums “tend to fill up with objects that are emblematic of high social status” and consecrate not just taste but the taste of the elite and powerful (all those donors and trustees of our art museums). “Thus if the museum display of antiquities alongside other artistic trappings of wealth and power is predicated largely or entirely upon the criterion of aesthetic merit, the message received by the visitor/consumer might be that the possession and transaction of equivalent pieces can form a legitimate route to social advancement or a socially approved sign of cultural attainment.”<sup>19</sup> His contempt for art museums, their purpose and public, is barely concealed. He would rather have antiquities collections be built for archaeology and archaeologists; that is, for his kind of elite, the elite of specialization and specialists. (In a huff of still more condescension, he notes that while the term *antiquity* is no longer a common one in archaeological usage, “where the more mundane ‘artifact’ is preferred,” it does convey “a sense of the archaeological artifact as collectible art object, and it is probably for this reason that ‘antiquity’ is commonly used in market and collecting circles”—presumably “artifact” is objective and *scientific* and is preferred usage among the knowledgeable elite.)

The authors of this book hold that public art museums are, and must be, responsible to a diverse public, who come to art museums for a variety of reasons but certainly to engage with the original work of art. Their particular interest in the work of art is not ours to question or dismiss. Our purpose is to provide them informed access to authentic works of art, to anticipate the range of questions they may have, and to try and help answer them through text labels, docent tours, scholarly lectures, podcasts, Web sites, and publications. We should never presume that they should be interested in only one aspect of an object’s meaning, the one that we find meaningful. Rather we should acknowledge that we can’t imagine all that interests them about individual works of art and cultural artifacts, and thus should encourage their wide-ranging and genuine curiosity about a whole host of things provoked by their coming into contact with original works of art. This is how the public values the art museum and is the basis of the public’s trust in we who work in them and on the public’s behalf.

The preservation of antiquities through acquisition and the building of encyclopedic museums is a matter of public trust. No less so now than during the era of the Enlightenment, visitors to museums entrust directors and curators to select works of art thought so important as to be brought into the public domain and preserved for the delight and education of peoples for of all of time. They want us to research and publish them and develop education programs around and stimulated by them. And they want to be encouraged to see qualities distinctive of them as individual works of art and to seek connections between them and other works throughout the museum's encyclopedic collections. Quite simply: they want museums to expand their world view and change their lives, to introduce them to the great wonder of the world's cultural diversity and interrelatedness and to help them see and feel that they are a part of this world, they and everyone else with whom they are connected by virtue of their humanity. This is a tall order indeed, and it must be pursued by museums responsibly and with vigor. Constraints placed on museums by the archaeological community and nationalist governments represent among the greatest challenges facing museums today as they endeavor to retain their public's trust in them, as Neil MacGregor has said of the British Museum, "truly the memory of mankind."

In *Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage*, I offered an example of how this works.<sup>20</sup> There I reviewed the qualities of six works of art in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago: a Shang Dynasty bronze *fangding* (fig. I.3), a Western Zhou Dynasty bronze cauldron (fig. I.4), a 16th-century Benin brass plaque (fig. I.5), a 19th century ivory altar tusk from the court of Benin (fig. I.6), a 13th century ivory casket from Sicily (fig. I.7), and a 14th century gilt silver monstrance (fig. I.8). I suggested that from even a brief consideration of these few objects in neighboring museum galleries we traveled halfway around the world and over thousands of years, from what is today China to Nigeria, Egypt, Sicily, and Germany. We saw how bronze is worked magnificently in two seemingly very different cultures; and how in each of the courts of the Zhou and Benin, objects were used to document courtly history and dynastic relations. We also saw how in these courts, as in medieval European Christian communities, precious objects were central to



Fig. I.3. *Fangding*, Shang Dynasty, 12th/11th century BC. China. Bronze (8 9/16 x 6 3/4 x 5 1/2 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Avery Brundage, Russell Tyson, and Alyce and Edwin DeCosta and Water Heller Endowments; General Acquisitions Fund, 2004.701. Photograph by Robert Hashimoto.

ritual practices, and how these rituals venerated, sometimes included pieces of, or were buried with human bodies. We saw how objects move about the world through trade or because of economic hardship, looting, and violence. And we saw how different cultures use, reuse, and transform other cultures' objects or decorative motifs, either indifferently or because they add value to the object in its new cultural setting. And in each instance, we admired the beauty and workmanship of the object and the sophistication of the culture within which it was produced. Unsuspected connections were made between cultures, and great distances in space and time were overcome.

But we needn't stop here. Curiosity leads us to objects of more modern manufacture. Near to the Benin carved ivory altar is a nineteenth-century *kiti cha enzi* chair ("chair of power" or "grandee's chair"; fig. I.9).<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 1.4. *Shi Wang Ding*, early 9th century BC. China. Western Zhou Dynasty. Bronze (19 1/4 x 16 7/8 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Major Acquisitions Centennial Fund, 2005.426. Photograph by Robert Hashimoto.

The chair was probably made sometime in Lamu, a small island archipelago off the northeast coast of Kenya in a region rich with Swahili cultural influences; although we can't be certain.

As a type, the *kiti cha enzi* chair has been said to have developed spontaneously in the region of Lamu and Zanzibar, from an earlier, simpler kind of Swahili chair, which continued to be made until around 1900. It has also been said that the chair was inspired by British colonial furniture, known as the campaign style, which flourished in India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; these kinds of chairs “were high-backed, square in their overall design, had arms and footrests, and were invariably caned; some were even elaborated with inlays of wood, shell or ivory, much like the marquetry found on Queen Anne chairs.” And it has been



Fig. I.5. Plaque with Courtier, 16th/early 17th century. Edo, Court of Benin. Bronze (13 3/8 x 11 3/8 x 1 7/8 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Samuel P. Avery Fund, 1933.782.

said that both the *kiti cha enzi* and earlier Swahili chairs probably derived from “ongoing cultural cross-fertilization” with the same, distant Mamluk Egyptian culture.<sup>22</sup>

The simple structure and elegantly minimal form of the Swahili chair resonates with another piece of furniture recently acquired by the



Fig. I.6. Royal Altar Tusk, 1850/1888. Edo, Court of Benin. Ivory (58 1/4 x 77 x 5 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mr. And Mrs. Edwin Hokin, 1976.523 view 2.



Fig. I.7. Casket, 1200/25. Sicily. Ivory, brass, tempera, and gold leaf (3 7/8 x 6 1/4 x 3 1/4 in.).  
The Art Institute of Chicago, Samuel P. Avery Endowment, 1926.389. Photograph by Robert Hashimoto.

Art Institute: a sideboard designed by the English designer Edward William Godwin around 1877 (fig. I.10).<sup>23</sup> Godwin's refined Arts and Crafts Movement style was heavily influenced by Asian art, especially that of Japan. We can see it here in the use of materials—ebonized mahogany (similar in appearance to Japanese, black lacquer) and silver plate—and in the elegant restraint of its form: a balance of solids and voids suspended in a network of parallel planes. A variant of this sideboard in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, even includes embossed Japanese leather panels applied to its doors.

Japanese art was exhibited in Britain at the 1861 Industrial Exhibition in Bristol, and then again at the 1862 London International Exhibition. Godwin's interest in a Japanese aesthetic influenced both his designs for furniture—his “Anglo-Japanese Furniture” designs were featured in the catalogue of William Watt's Art Furniture Company, London, and illustrated in a *Building News* review of Watt's stand in the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1878—and the studio houses of his friends, Frank Miles and



Fig. I.8. Monstrance with Tooth of St. John the Baptist, 1375/1400. Germany, Lower Saxony, Brunswick. Gilt silver (17 7/8 x 5 1/4 in.). Rock crystal, 900/1000. Egypt, Fatimid Dynasty. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Chauncey McCormick, 1962.91 side 1. Photograph by Robert Hashimoto.





Fig. I.9. *Kiti cha enzi* Chair. 1900, Kenya, probably Lamu; Swahili. Wood, ivory, bone, and string (49 1/2 x 29 3/4 x 28 1/2 in.) The Art Institute of Chicago; restricted Gift of Marshall Field V, 2004.476. Photograph by Robert Hashimoto.



Fig. I.10. Sideboard, ca. 1877. Designed by Edward William Godwin (English, 1833–1886), made by William Watt, Art Furniture Warehouse, London. Ebonized mahogany with glass and silver-plated copper alloy (72 1/2 x 100 1/2 x 19 3/4 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Robert Allerton, Harry and Maribel G. Blum, Mary and Leigh Block, Mary Waller Langhorne, Mrs. Siegfried G. Schmidt, Tillie C. Cohn, Richard T. Crane Jr., Memorial, Eugene A. Davidson, Harriott A. Fox, Florence L. Notter, Kay and Frederick Krehbiel, European Decorative Arts Purchase, and Irving and June Seaman Endowments; through Prior Acquisition of the Reid Martin Estate.

James MacNeill Whistler. Whistler himself, of course, was deeply interested in and influenced by Japanese art. His painting, *The Artist in His Studio* of 1865–66 (fig. I.11), in the Art Institute's collection, is characteristic of his delight in simplified forms and references to Japanese precedents (the model in a kimono-like robe holding a Japanese fan). There is even the representation of his collection of Asian (probably Chinese) ceramics, mounted in the wall case to the left. The Arts and Crafts aesthetic generally was influenced by Japanese precedents. Frank Lloyd Wright was an active collector of Japanese prints. He even designed an elegant Arts and Crafts installation for a 1908 Art Institute exhibition of more than 650 Japanese prints, many of which were loaned from his own collection. And, in the way that culture works, the Arts and Crafts movements in the United States



Fig. I.11. James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *The Artist in His Studio*, 1865/66. Oil on paper, mounted on panel (24 3/4 x 18 1/4 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection, 1912.141.

and Europe were themselves influential in the formation of the Mingei or Folk Crafts Movement in Japan in the first decades of the twentieth century. Led by Yanagi Sōetsu, that movement was self-consciously hybrid, drawing upon both European and Japanese examples thereby asserting, as a recent scholar has written, “a strong nationalistic sense of cultural identity and yet [promoting] a form of international urban modernity through discovering, aestheticizing and commodifying tradition.”<sup>24</sup>

This was true as well of Godwin’s sideboard and the Swahili *kiti cha enzi* chair: both, while firmly rooted in their local cultures were enriched by their culture’s centuries of contact with other cultures. And of course,

this is true of culture generally. Culture thrives, even *depends*, on contact with new and strange things. It is never static. It is forever changing. Salman Rushdie described his novel *Satanic Verses* as celebrating “hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it.”<sup>25</sup> This is a perfect description of culture itself: always mongrel, impure, rich with generative potential. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has said, “Cultural purity is an oxymoron” (see his “Whose Culture Is It?” in this volume).

Culture is poorly served by politics. Modern nation-states claim culture for themselves. They nationalize it. They say it is important to their identity and they try to police it. They put national borders around it and claim, as the Italian government did in its recent request to the U.S. government for the imposition of import restrictions on a whole range of antiquities said to have been improperly removed from Italy’s jurisdiction, “These materials [the hundreds of years of antiquities covered by the request] are of cultural significance because they derive from cultures that developed autonomously in the region of present day Italy that attained a high degree of political, technological, economic, and artistic achievement. . . . [T]he cultural patrimony represented by these materials is a source of identity and esteem for the modern Italian nation.” No significant, lasting culture ever developed autonomously, least all that of ancient Rome. The ancient Romans embraced the culture of ancient Greece and modeled theirs on it. (Plutarch, himself Greek with only a passing knowledge of Latin, wrote his famous *Parallel Lives*, pairing famous Greek and Roman figures and chronicling their noble deeds and characters.) Nearly all of Roman visual culture—vase painting, marble and bronze sculpture—has Greek precedents. And of course the Greeks had colonized much of southern Italy and Sicily for hundreds of years before the rise of Rome (hence, the Latin term *Magna Graecia* for that part of Italy, “Greater Greece”; the Greeks called it *Megale Hellas*). And Greek culture itself bears the imprint of other cultures: Egypt and the lands eastward toward India,

all the lands and cultures with which the overland and seafaring power came into contact.

It is the nature of culture to be dynamic and ever changing. Yet national governments ignore this fact. They impose a national claim of distinction on culture, and they seek an ancient pedigree for that culture. They want to claim primacy as much as purity: ancient origins and uninterrupted identity. But this is only politics. Modern Egypt's claim of descent from pharaonic Egypt, or the People's Republic of China from the ancient Qin, or Iraq from Mesopotamia, or Italy from ancient Rome is nationalist fantasy based on the accident of geography and enforced by sovereignty. Just ask the Copts in Egypt, the Tibetans in China, or the Kurds in Iraq.

It is the promise of the encyclopedic museum to counter the nationalization of culture and its claim on antiquity. We have seen how it works in my brief account of a few works of art in the collection of the Art Institute. Compelled by common materials, forms, and functions, as well by their beauty, we experienced the promise of museums. And this experience—one that is available in all encyclopedic museums everywhere—is a reminder that despite the nationalist and sectarian pressures on us to limit our identities to certain narrow, political affiliations, we have much more to gain by seeking similarities between us than by relying on crude, reductive, falsely unifying cultural identities. As Nayan Chanda reminds us, "We benefit from all the world has to offer, but we think only in narrow terms of protecting the land and people within our national borders—the borders that have been established only in the modern era. The barbed wire, chain-link fences, security fences, and immigration and customs agents that separate us from the rest of the world . . . cannot change the fact that we are bound together through the invisible filament of history."<sup>26</sup>

This is why it is imperative that we continue building encyclopedic museum collections and provide safe harbor within them for unprovenanced antiquities. They, no less than the other objects in our collections, are important artifacts of human history, evidence of our common artistic legacy, deserving of our respect. They have equal claim on the Enlightenment ideal of the museum as a repository of things and knowledge, dedicated to the museum's role as a force for understanding, tolerance, and the dissipation of ignorance and superstition about the world, where the artifacts

of one time and one culture can be seen next to those of other times and other cultures without prejudice. Such is the *promise* of the museum. And such is the claim of this book.

The contributions to this book represent the points of view of leading museum professionals and university- and museum-based scholars, who, over the years, have either distinguished themselves in their specialized fields of work and research or contributed significantly to the discourse on the role of museums in contemporary society.

The origin of this book lay, most immediately, in a conference organized by AAMD in the spring of 2006 and cited in this book's Acknowledgements. Titled "Museums and the Collecting of Antiquities: Past, Present, and Future," the conference was organized in two parts. The first explored the value of museums and the value of antiquities, while the second comprised a lively debate on the subject of ancient culture and museums, "Saving Sites and Serving Knowledge." Over the course of a long day of papers and discussion, it became clear that the museum's position on the topic needed to be presented in book form. To preserve the character of that conference, I reprint here contributions by Neil MacGregor, Philippe de Montebello, and James Watt as they were delivered. These are complemented by essays either commissioned especially for this volume or reprinted from other books or journals. Necessarily, the tone of the contributions differs accordingly: the first are direct, written to be heard, while the second were written to be read and are accompanied by more substantial scholarly apparatus. Each is imbued with the personality of its author and his personal engagement with the subject of this book. In a few cases—David Owen and John Boardman, especially—the tone is even, at times, confrontational. Such is the nature of the debate: much is at stake, and each author has decades of professional expertise invested in his point of view.

The book is divided into three parts: "The Value of Museums," "The Value of Antiquities," and "Museums, Antiquities, and Cultural Property." In part one, Neil MacGregor, Philippe de Montebello, and Kwame Anthony Appiah consider the value and cultural politics of museums in the current climate of opinion. MacGregor writes from the perspective of director of

one the world's greatest encyclopedic museums, the British Museum, which was founded on Enlightenment ideals and dedicated to the preservation, research, and presentation of the art and artifacts of the world's many cultures. He has lectured widely on the role of museums in our world, and he writes here of his experience in formulating new programs and policies, especially with regard to broadening public access to the British Museum's great collections and to the museum's role in discovering new truths about our world. Philippe de Montebello, writing with more than thirty years' experience as director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and with considerable experience dealing and negotiating with claimant nations, argues with passion and intelligence that museums should acquire antiquities, provenanced and unprovenanced, for the contributions such acquisitions make to the preservation and further study of our common, ancient past. Kwame Anthony Appiah's essay first appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and derives from his 2006 book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* and lays the basis for the larger consideration of the politics of treating antiquities as a modern nation's cultural property. Always, this is at the cost of encouraging a broader understanding of the interrelatedness and diversity of culture and our common artistic legacy. As Appiah writes of ancient Nok sculptures claimed by Nigeria as part of its patrimony: "We don't know whether Nok sculptures were commissioned by kings or commoners; we don't know whether the people who made them and the people who paid for them thought of them as belonging to the kingdom, to a man, to a lineage, to the gods. One thing we know for sure, however, is that they didn't make them for Nigeria."

In part two, "The Value of Antiquities," James C. Y. Watt, Sir John Boardman, and David I. Owen consider what can be learned from antiquities even without knowing their specific archaeological contexts. James C. Y. Watt, for example, an eminent Chinese art historian with considerable experience in the archaeological field, notes the limitations of archaeology for our greater understanding of our ancient past. He argues that archaeology has yet to help us understand why ancient artists made certain forms in jade or decorated bronze objects a certain way, or even, perhaps most poignantly, what ancient Chinese music sounded like, even though we have

unearthed ancient Chinese instruments, and thus know what they sound like today. Sir John Boardman, drawing on examples from his esteemed career as an archaeologist and art historian of ancient Greek art, argues forcefully against a number of positions taken by archaeologists in their criticism of museums' acquiring unprovenanced antiquities, most notably the criticisms of the aforementioned Colin Renfrew. These include the familiar claim cited above that without knowledge of their archaeological contexts, antiquities have little, if any meaning; that they rightfully belong in their "countries of origin"; that scholarship based on unprovenanced antiquities should not be published or presented in public lectures; and that the trade—even the legitimate trade—in antiquities leads to looting and the loss of knowledge about the past. David I. Owen, drawing on his distinguished career as professor of Ancient Near Eastern studies and more than twenty years excavating in Turkey, Greece, and Israel, argues for the benefit of studying ancient Near Eastern cuneiform tablets for all that they can teach us, even if we do not know the archaeological circumstances of their unearthing. And he criticizes the policies and practices of the archaeological establishment that, as cited above, opposes the publication and acquisition by museums of unprovenanced antiquities at the expense of what they can teach about the ancient past. This is, he argues, a shameful disservice to scholarship and the advancement of knowledge.

Finally, part three, "Museums, Antiquities, and Cultural Property," offers museological, philosophical, and legal contexts within which to consider the more specific theses of the earlier papers. Michael F. Brown, a noted anthropologist who has written widely on the politics of—and ideological debates surrounding—the display and designation of indigenous (of "native") culture, considers the constraints on modern museums that seek to collect, present, and interpret tangible elements of cultural heritage, what is often called "cultural property." Since increasingly antiquities are defined as a nation's, or a people's, cultural property, Brown's reflections on the accusations of cultural appropriation of indigenous peoples' culture by nonindigenous scholars and institutions (i.e., museums), are highly relevant to a consideration of the role of—and constraints on—encyclopedic museums seeking to collect and exhibit representative examples of



the world's artistic legacy, especially antiquities from so-called source countries, which often feel aggrieved as former colonial territories. Derek Gillman, executive director and president of the Barnes Foundation, has written widely on art museums and public policy. His contribution derives from his recently published book *The Idea of Cultural Heritage* (2006). Gillman considers three case studies for what they teach us about nationalist or culturalist claims on antiquities and works of art. He considers the philosophical principles by which one group (typically now a nation) claims identity with its heritage as exclusive to itself. And he asks the question on what basis can we accept that a cultural group has the character of a natural person and can be wounded by the loss of, or damage to, a national/personal symbol self-proclaimed as such, like the Bamiyan Buddhas, Parthenon/Elgin Marbles, or indeed the Lansdowne portrait of George Washington?

John Henry Merryman's paper, which is a reprinting of his seminal 1995 article "The Nation and the Object," proposes a "triad of regulatory imperatives" when considering constraints on the acquisition of antiquities. The first, and most basic, is preservation. How can we best protect the object and its context from impairment? Second, is the quest for knowledge. How can we best advance our search for valid information about the human past, for "the historical, scientific, cultural, and aesthetic truth that the object and its context can provide." And the third is access. How can we best assure that the object is "optimally accessible to scholars for study and to the public for education and enjoyment." He calls this triad "preservation, truth, and access." More than ten years later, these imperatives offer the best and most reasonable guide through the thicket of arguments around the acquisition of antiquities, provenanced and unprovenanced.

This book will not be the final word in the debate over antiquities. But we hope it will add a new angle to the frame within which the discussion henceforth takes place. Nothing is more important to the fate of the preservation and greater understanding of our world's common ancient past and antique legacy than we resolve the differences that divide the various parties in the dispute. Warfare and sectarian violence, which is destroying evidence of the past faster and more surely than the destruction

of archaeological sites by looters, is beyond our control. Differences among museum professionals, university- and museum-based scholars, archaeologists, their sympathizers, national politicians, and international agencies should not be.

## NOTES

1. James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). The debate has attracted considerable public attention, with accounts of or references to it appearing frequently in newspapers and magazines, public and university symposia, and specialist—even sensationalist—books and blogs and Web sites. Among only the most recent such studies are Kate Fitz Gibbon, ed., *Who Owns the Past? Cultural Policy, Cultural Property, and the Law* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Barbara T. Hoffman, ed., *Art and Cultural Heritage: Law, Policy, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and John H. Merryman, ed., *Imperialism, Art, and Restitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Among the more sensational book-length publications are Roger Atwood, *Stealing History: Tomb Raiders, Smugglers, and the Looting of the Ancient World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006); Matthew Bogdanos and William Patrick, *Thieves of Baghdad* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005); Colin Renfrew, *Loot, Legitimacy, and Ownership: The Ethical Crisis in Archaeology* (London: Duckworth, 2000); and Peter Watson and Cecilia Todeschini, *The Medici Conspiracy: The Illicit Journey of Looted Antiquities, from Italy's Tomb Raiders to the World's Greatest Museums* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006). Also see Neil Brodie, Jennifer Doole, and Colin Renfrew, eds., *Trade in Illicit Antiquities: The Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2001).
2. The text of the 1970 UNESCO Convention can be found on UNESCO's Web site, [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org). It can also be found, together with a list of the states party to the Convention and the date that each state enacted its terms, on the U.S. Department of State Web site, <http://exchanges.state.gov/culprop/it01fr01.html>.
3. The texts of the relevant AAMD guidelines can be found on its Web site, [www.aamd.org](http://www.aamd.org).
4. See Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 152–55; Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique:*