



ART MUSEUMS AND THE INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE OF CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

October, 2001

The responsibility for the presentation, study, protection, and care of much of the artistic achievement of mankind rests with the world's art museums. Whether public or private, museums undertake this work in furtherance of the public good. The experience of art fosters the appreciation of beauty and human ingenuity, and promotes understanding among the diverse peoples and cultures of the world.

Acquiring works of art through gift or purchase is a vital part of a museum's mission. New acquisitions spur research, stimulate exhibitions, and contribute to the enjoyment and enlightenment of the visitor.

Acquisition of the arts of ancient cultures and indigenous peoples poses issues that must be addressed thoughtfully. Unscrupulous behavior on the part of some individuals and organizations has led to pillaging of archaeological sites, causing the destruction of cultural heritage and the unlawful, uncontrolled dispersal of artifacts. American museums, charged with the preservation of works of art, condemn actions that damage monuments, sites, or the integrity of an architectural structure. The exchange of cultural artifacts must be conducted according to the highest standards of ethical and professional practice.

The United States government has adopted a global perspective on culture, believing that citizens of other countries benefit from exposure to American works of art just as Americans benefit from exposure to the arts of other cultures. American museums are committed to the free exchange of ideas and the responsible acquisition of cultural artifacts. They support the view that the artistic achievements of all civilizations should be represented in American museums where they may inspire and be enjoyed by all. The interests of the public at large are served through museums around the world working in partnership to preserve and interpret our shared cultural heritage.

Conducting research, and publishing the results of that research, are key components of a museum's educational mission. While it is highly desirable to

know the archaeological context in which an artifact was discovered because this can reveal information about the origin of the work and the culture that produced it, this is not always possible. Nevertheless, much information may be gleaned from works of art even when the circumstances of their discovery are unknown. Indeed, most of what we know about early civilizations has been learned from artifacts whose archaeological context has been lost.

In addition to researching works already in their collections, museums also research proposed acquisitions. They seek to verify the authenticity of the work, address its relevance to the museum's collections and its community, affirm that the seller or donor has good title, and determine that it has not been illegally imported into the United States. Conclusive proof is not always possible, because documentation and physical evidence may be inaccessible or lost. Still, American museums proceed with the utmost caution and respect in acquiring works of art from other countries.

To deter illicit trade and to ensure that the importation of art and artifacts from other countries is conducted in a lawful and responsible manner, museum directors consider the following questions when acquiring the arts of ancient cultures and indigenous peoples:

- Is a country's cultural patrimony in jeopardy from pillage of archaeological and ethnological materials and/or other illegal actions and how will the acquisition affect such activity?
- Is the importation of the cultural artifacts consistent with the interests of the international community, especially for scientific, cultural, and/or educational purposes?
- Is the importation consistent with applicable law, including relevant international conventions?
- How did the work come into the possession of the seller?
- Is there information and documentation that can be reasonably obtained to shed further light on the origins of the work and the circumstances of its acquisition?
- Is there evidence that the work is being legally exported?

The institutions represented by the membership of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) address these issues according to the mandates of their individual missions and guidelines. Museums operate with a system of checks and balances by which museum directors, trustees, and staff evaluate and decide upon the appropriate course of action in acquiring works of art. Core values guide all aspects of a museum's work: fulfillment of its mission to serve the public through art and education, adherence to the AAMD's professional

standards of quality while serving the specific interests of its community, accountability, integrity, clarity of purpose and openness in communications. The AAMD promulgates fundamental standards by which art museums should be governed and managed. These principles are found in the publication, *Professional Practices in Art Museums*, which has been revised at ten-year intervals since 1971.

The AAMD is a membership organization that represents 175 directors of the major art museums in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The President for 2001-2002 is James Cuno, Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard University Art Museums. AAMD's Executive Director is Millicent Hall Gaudieri.