

Comment on “Irreconcilable differences?”

Sir John Boardman

Emeritus Lincoln Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology
University of Oxford

My article of 2006 addresses many of the points raised in Ms Tubb’s interesting paper, but also a number of others touched on, but still not adequately considered, to my mind, in the growing literature on the subject (Boardman 2006). My comments here are limited mainly to select aspects which require further discussion, or which seem to me self-evident, although commonly ignored.

1. ‘Cultural heritage’ comes easily to the pen or lips in such matters, without much thought or explanation. Part is a natural interest in the history of man, and for scholars it requires no further justification as an object for research. For the rest of the public it is hardly less important and there is a general sense of loss when any such ‘heritage’ is threatened. A special case might seem to be an interest in heritage associated with race or place, which is why some think objects should stay where or near where they are found. This can be largely sentimental, and many objects are foreign in culture or message to where they are found. It would be very difficult to find much in common between the art and religion of the lands of ancient Greece or ‘Italy’ (a modern concept) and their present cultures, yet the interest in this ‘heritage’ is there, mixed with various other considerations, such as tourism, but strengthened by some continuity in language. Or think of objects from countries which have been successively ‘pagan’, Buddhist, Islamic. But the interest is there no less for any people who can perceive that their ‘culture’ derives from a past which may not even be of local conception or development. The West is almost wholly indebted to the cultural heritage of classical Europe, but this does not make it any the less concerned about the history of man outside classicism, in the Orient or in pre-Columbian America. When the cry is for the return of objects to their ‘cultural homes’, one might reasonably ask “whose home?”. The country with the largest population whose culture is derived from that of classical Europe is the United States. Large Greek or Italian populations in the USA may have no less (possibly more, being removed from it) regard for their cultural heritage as those in the homeland itself. Here the respect for fashionable ‘globality’ is quietly forgotten when artefacts are involved, and the archaeologists who make the most noise about ‘return of heritage’ are generally not those with much or any sense of later history, and often with little or no sense for objects *per se* and what they can teach without any recorded context.

In the British Museum I once observed a black family, where the father was wisely pointing out to children how the faces on archaic Greek vases resembled the Egyptian in the next room. He should have been able to do this in any decent museum in the world, and might do so the better if it was stocked with ‘new’ material on a regular basis. But source countries would never cooperate seriously in such an aim; greed and the fact that most material has never been properly published is a sufficient disincentive

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to generosity. (All right; there are exceptions - extremely few. And the most common fault is with the excavator who does not publish - the real criminal in these matters since he destroys evidence as well as hides objects, and for this there can be no excuse whatever). It is right that Benin should receive 'back' many of its early bronzes, but would be absurd and counter to the interests of education as well as public enjoyment of man's past, if all were repatriated. The thought that "if you want to admire Benin, go there" is utterly unrealistic, like confining pleasure in poetry only to works in one's own language.

Many objects without provenance are useless to a scholar but not meaningless to a student or to the general public, and archaeologists would do well to think sometimes about the source of their funding and their responsibilities to it.

2. It is easy and right to make cases for return where what may be deemed at some times and places criminal behaviour is proved to be involved. This presents no problem and open sites should be legally protected, but we might reflect that global variety in legal requirements strongly suggests that there is and perhaps can be no commonly accepted norm of correct behaviour. It is not like "Thou shalt not kill". Politicians may not understand this.

3. Many objects without provenance are perfectly intelligible and have long been crucial sources for research. To pretend otherwise suggests a considerable lack of scholarly experience. A scholar who by 'self-censorship' refuses to use such evidence, or a body which refuses others the opportunity to publish such evidence, is acting against the interests of scholarship and deserves more disdain than respect.

4. A conservator who refuses to save an unprovenanced or even an illicitly acquired object is a disgrace to his/her profession, as would be a doctor who refuses to attend to a sick criminal, whether or not 'awaiting trial'.

References

- Boardman, J. 2006. Archaeologists, Collectors, and Museums, in Robson, E., Treadwell, L. and Gosden, C. (eds.) *Who Owns Objects? The Ethics and Politics of Collecting Cultural Artefacts*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 33-46.