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That Belongs in a Museum

Zoe Kontes Reflection

Zoe Kontes’ visit to UNH was a great opportunity to understand her side of the antiquities debate going on right now. Her thoughts on looting in US museums are illuminating for the viewer. Although I was not able to go to her presentation, I was still able to learn a lot from the video.

What I found so interesting is the availability of antiquities and artifacts on online websites. It amazed me that you can buy rare coins or any kind of antiquity with ease. She argued that “the market drives looting” which I agree with. If museums and private collectors never buy illegal antiquities, then looting would cease to exist. There would be no point to go into the business. She brought up many pieces, mainly in the US, where the antiquities in museums mean almost nothing without any context. It is a common occurrence that labels do not provide a full picture on the pieces history: who made it? When was it made? What is it? For archaeologists, improper excavation of art from humanities past destroys the opportunity to learn from it. Zoe Kontes said that “the piece needs context.” It loses the context as soon as it is moved from where it was found. An interesting point she brought up was the ‘totem pole’ of looting. She gave an example of a purchase of a bronze sculpture, which is very rare, for 4 million dollars in 1964. The actual ‘finders’ of the piece was given 5,000 dollars for it. That is a huge separation of payment.

This talk allowed me to rethink the process of looting, what needs to be changed to learn from the past, and make sure that the preservation of these pieces continue to allow the education of history to people around the world. Labels need to be more clear, looting needs to be changed to keep the context of finds, and the culture of antiquity purchases need to be altered to make the movement of antiquities safe. We also need to make sure that information on this matter is widely spread so people are educated on the matter.