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That Belongs in a Museum

Paper #2

The United States’ Responsibility to Antiquities

Article 7 of the UNESCO treaty states “The States Parties to this Convention undertake the necessary measures, consistent with national legislation, to prevent museums and similar institutions within their territories from acquiring cultural property originating in another State Party which has been illegally exported after entry into force of this Convention, in the States concerned” (UNESCO). This article puts responsibility on receiving nations to ensure that each antiquity is bought, traded or otherwise received under the guidelines of the entire UNESCO treaty. The UNESCO treaty was ratified and signed by countries around the world in 1970 to strictly follow and enforce laws to eliminate all illegal dealing of antiquities and assist in the preservation and protection of antiquities around the world. The US is responsible for the preservation of antiquities around the world when there is a threat to its life; the US should set an example to all developed nations that this commitment of protection is important to the future of humanity.

The countries of the modern world that have a rich cultural heritage possess artifacts that they want to be returned to their origin. It is important to understand that modern, developed countries have played a role in the preservation of antiquities since the beginning of cultural artifacts. Article 5 of the UNESCO treaty states the signed parties responsibility is “to ensure the protection of their cultural property against illicit import, export and transfer of ownership.” It continues to recommend that “Parties, as appropriate for each country, to set up within their territories one or more national services, where such services do not already exist, for the protection of the cultural heritage, with a qualified staff sufficient in number for the effective carrying out the required functions.” This requires each party to fund a government agency that is responsible for controlling the import, export and transfer of any antiquity going through its borders. The US is a global superpower that allows us to fund the programs needed to preserve the remains of ancient cultures. Undeveloped countries and other less powerful countries do not have the resources to delegate funds to support the preservation of the antiquities found in their land. Italy is an example of a developed country that “even for an industrialized nation, it is a heavy responsibility to preserve, and Italy cannot always keep up. Many pieces in museum storehouses remain unstudied and unrestored, for lack of funds” (Waxman 287). The importance of this is supported by Waxman when she wrote “if we don’t understand the origins of human history, we are nowhere” (Waxman 372). To be able to move forward and progress as a species, we must remember the mistakes we have already made and learn from them. By being able to afford the expense of long-term preservation obligates the US and the other developed countries to step forward and show the world that antiquities are worth keeping safe. It allows the US to lead by example, with the potential of other developed countries to follow suit.

If countries request antiquities that are currently being cared for somewhere else, should the US and other developed nations return the pieces that have been part of their facilities for so long? Waxman says that the “countries that have aggressively persuaded demands for restitution of antiquities are Egypt, Turkey, Greece and Italy” (Waxman 9). Ethically, the argument is difficult to solve. Do the Parthenon Marbles and all other antiquities that were created before the ‘modern’ nation existed belong to the nation that shared its origin location? Or is it an antiquity of the world that is meant to be shared and displayed to as many people from any culture? The US and its museums have repatriated many antiquities back to their place of origin, but a line exists where the antique now belongs to its caretaker, It can be displayed and taught to people around the world. Repatriation can also be used for political gain, such as giving back an antiquity to a powerful nation with the sole reason of creating a stronger connection with that country. This political move is unethical because it treats nations that you would like to improve diplomatic relations with and discards the wants of another, less powerful nation. Unfortunately, most decisions have a political motive and is impossible to stop. Waxman brings up the extreme scenario of repatriation regarding the Getty and all developed nation’s museums by stating that “if all the countries where the antiquities came from asked for the unprovenanced pieces back, the Getty would be empty. But not just the Getty. Most of the American museums would be empty” (Waxman 297). The US needs to create rules on when repatriation is appropriate: if the political gain outweighs the exception to when repatriation would be appropriate, and weather this decision allows us to remain an example to other powerful nations to ensure the protection and preservation of the antiquities that define human culture.

The last point to consider is the priority that the US will assign when funding different government programs. Can the money that is used for the preservation of antiquities be better spent in the other programs of the government? People are still homeless and hungry on the streets, why not help them instead? Although the argument is valid, antiquities are not only kept because of the physical need to keep what our ancestors have made, but because its cosmopolitan impact on the people who see it, either in museums or in its natural spot. The US, as well as all developed nations, is responsible in the preservation of antiquities from all cultures around the world and should set an example to all developed nations that this responsibility is important to the future of humanity. These antiquities are ambassadors to the culture that it represents. Its care should be a priority to all nations and the US can lead by example on how to deal with the antiquity conflicts that exist.

Works Cited

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