**Thesis: A Framework for A Fairer Museum**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Data Visualization at Parsons School of Design**

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**Abstract**

Restitution is defined by Merriam Webster as “the restoration of something to its rightful owner.” [1] Many authors have explored the impacts restitution has had on art, museums and the party making the return request. However, universal models seem to be lacking. This paper proposes a model for a restitution process through data visualization giving a voice to the marginalized in the process. Restitution and repatriation will be used interchangeably in this paper. Firstly, it will explore the history of repatriation, some of the key contested pieces and some of the positives and negatives of the most popular restitution frameworks: UNESCO & NAGPRA. The framework is the main portion of the paper and proposes four pillars: Patriotism, Legality, Morality, and Universalism. Then we will explore application use cases. This model will be applied to the MET’s collection through their API, as reproducibility of this framework is key. We will also explore other potential use cases.

**Keywords: Data Visualization, Restitution, Repatriation, Model Building, Museums, Indigenous Culture**

**Introduction**

This paper sets out to deliver a framework in order to conceptualize a universal process for the repatriation of art. The framework was inspired by current repatriation events and the renewed interest by nations to return items that were possibly unfairly acquired. This model is one of many ways a restitution framework could be developed however, through no such universal system currently exists. The premise is that four pillars: Patriotism, Legality, Morality and Universalism, each with a specific key performing indicator (KPIs), weighted according to their importance in the process, come together to ultimately form a score on an item of art, which can then be influential in the final decision repatriation process. This project is not meant to be a substitution to or erasing the work currently being done by museum institutions.

The arguments for the return or the remaining of artifacts have been pretty contentious. Those who argue for the items to remain housed in their adopted institutions believe that the museum is the best place for the particular item on the basis of universality. In James Cuno’s book “Who Owns Antiquity?”, the author makes the argument that the encyclopedic museum[’s] ﻿direct attention to distant cultures, asking visitors to respect the values of others and seek connections between cultures. [Cuno, James. Who Owns Antiquity? (p. xix)] On the other hand, proponents for the return of items to their original owners argue that the return of objects ﻿Ethnographic museums, in particular, have been the keepers of other people’s cultures, imposing their own classifications and interpretations onto objects from different peoples around the world: indigenous groups almost never had a voice. Artefacts were even removed from communities in the late-nineteenth century–early-twentieth century on the basis that their cultures would become extinct, as a result of the ‘inevitable’ march of Westernization. But certain cultures are still thriving and want their objects back.

Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches (p. 3). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.