

Cultural property and museum ethics - a class response

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Haidy Geismar, NYU

I am currently teaching a graduate seminar "cultural property, rights and museums" in the NYU Program for Museum Studies. During this week's class we had a tour of the Greek, Roman, and Ancient Near Eastern Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with curator [Oscar Muscarella](#). Muscarella is somewhat notorious for his outspoken criticism of the complicity of museum curators in the illicit trade and plunder of world cultural heritage and despite the truth of what he says is ostracized by many in the museum world.

From our perspective, as museum studies students, and anthropologists, it seems self-evident to expose the complex ways in which looted objects are authenticated via fine-art display strategies (as context free and therefore not linked to particular pillaged sites) and to understand the social dynamics of the art world in which the social world of collectors and collections overshadows the seamier side of illicit trade.

Cindy Ho from [Saving Antiquities for Everyone](#) asked us to think about the new ethical guidelines developed by the American Association of Museums which lay out a series of principles for ethical collections all museums should adhere to (see <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/coe.cfm>, and see the ICOM guidelines <http://icom.museum/ethics.html>) and I asked the class to read the guidelines and make suggestions around ways in which museums could activate ethics in a more publicly available manner (I mean, who has ever seen an exhibition which explains how the objects came into the museum or deals with the intricacies of looting, pillaging, dealing and collecting? In the Metropolitan Museum, objects loaned by the Italian government in return for the repatriation of the Euphronios Krater are labelled with large red labels as Major Loans but there is no explanation as to why these pieces would literally be red flagged and a museum visitor would have no knowledge of the controversy that has arisen around many objects on display).

I thought I would use materialworldblog as a forum to extend our class discussion and open the debate to wider readers - what do we think about the remit of ethical guidelines and their efficacy? How can museums make these issues more available to the public and should this be part of the guidelines themselves? How come ethics and law are so separated on these issues? What responsibilities do museums have in these debates and how should they position themselves? Class, and anyone else, please weigh in, in the comments below....