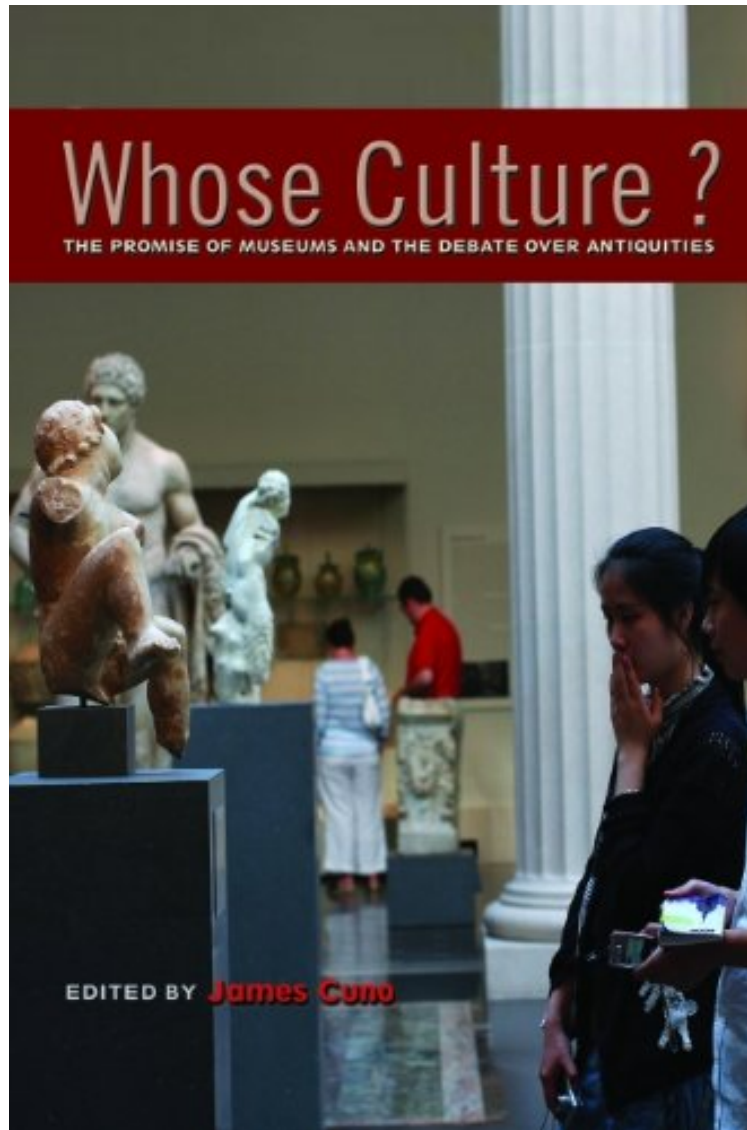


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Whose Culture?: The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities

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1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Support for Encyclopedic Museums By Robert Lebling This successor to "Who Owns Antiquity?" features essays by scholars who, like Cuno, support encyclopedic museums and advocate an internationalist approach to ownership of ancient cultural heritage. Among them are Kwame Anthony

Appiah of Princeton, Sir John Boardman of Oxford, British Museum director Neil MacGregor and David Owen of Cornell. A key issue is unprovenanced artifacts - objects whose original archaeological context is unknown. Many archaeologists say museums should not acquire such artworks, because trade in them encourages looting, theft and illegal exports. Cuno and colleagues disagree, noting that artworks like the impressive Hellenistic sculpture Laocoön and that invaluable key to Egypt's hieroglyphics called the Rosetta Stone could never be acquired or displayed or studied today, given such policies. Owen notes sentiment against unprovenanced artifacts is so intense that the United States, Britain and Germany are campaigning to stop publication of cuneiform inscriptions that have emerged from the Iraqi war zone, sadly unprovenanced but still of potentially great value. Archaeological journals flatly refuse to publish these inscriptions or their translations. Owen brands this "censorship" and "suppression of knowledge." Boardman takes on the "vocal minority" of archeologists who oppose acquisition of unprovenanced ancient art by either collectors or museums. He is astonished by the arrogance of those who consider themselves "absolute guardians of the world's heritage." Boardman says it can be argued that more information has been destroyed by archeologists than by collectors. Also, in his experience, far less than 25 percent of findings of professional archaeologists has been properly published, "and the rest will never get beyond preliminary reports, if that." Other topics of interest in this volume: the Taliban's destruction of the gigantic Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan, and the long-running dispute over Britain's removal of the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon. [A version of this review appeared in Saudi Aramco World, Mar/Apr 2010.] 11 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

THE "UNIVERSAL MUSEUM" OF THE RICH AND POWERFUL. By OKTHE "UNIVERSAL MUSEUM" OF THE RICH AND POWERFUL., May 1, 2009

Cuno ends his introduction to *Whose Culture?* with a statement which many of us could easily subscribe to in so far as it appears to be a call for dialogue: "This book will not be the final word in the debate over antiquities. But we hope it will add a new angle to the frame within which the discussion henceforth takes place. Nothing is more important to the fate of the preservation and greater understanding of our world's common ancient past and antique legacy than we resolve the differences that divide the various parties in the dispute. Warfare and sectarian violence, which is destroying evidence of the past faster and more surely than the destruction of archaeological sites by looters, is beyond our control. Differences among museum professionals, university- and museum-based scholars, archaeologists, their sympathizers, national politicians, and international agencies should not be." Clearly museum professionals and other scholars should be able to solve the issues of cultural property if there is goodwill on both sides. But is there? This reasonable appeal should be seen in the context of the recent writings of Cuno and the rest of the introduction. Before this conciliatory appeal, the same author makes this interesting declaration: "It is the purpose of this book to challenge the perception of museums as rapacious acquirers of ill-gotten goods and to argue instead that our public museums build their antiquities collections responsibly and for the public's benefit. Some readers will be disappointed that not "all sides" of the debate are presented here. It is our view that other books already do this and well enough that we needn't repeat the "both sides of the argument" formula here. And, perhaps more to the point, other books are partisan in opposition to the museum's position as we are presenting it and need to be responded to." The above statement of Cuno sounds like an open abandonment of all pretence to objectivity and impartiality. The mask of impartial scholarship which considers all aspects and views on a subject matter, including the views of opponents, is openly abandoned. Should we follow the author's qualification of the writings of Lord Renfrew as "sensational" and qualify the views in this book as mainly "propaganda", seeing that the editor has admitted abandoning any attempt to consider all sides of the issue of restitution and cultural property? Good consequences could flow from the abandonment of pretence to impartiality and objectivity. This may lead to giving up the pretension that the so-called universal museums - British Museum, Louvre, Art Institute of Chicago and the Ethnology Museum of Berlin are open to the whole world and serve mankind when most people live thousands of miles away from those institutions. Moreover, the governments of the countries where the museums are located are actively making it difficult for outsiders to visit those countries through immigration rules. Perhaps there will soon be the realization that the thousands of Benin bronzes and other cultural objects languishing in the museum depots do not serve mankind. On recognizing the reality they have up to now denied, the museums may be willing to share those artefacts and thus serve humanity. They may then be able to consider, for example, sharing with the people of Benin the Benin Bronzes: Berlin - Ethnologisches Museum 580. Chicago - Art Institute of Chicago 20, Field Museum 400. Cologne - Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum 73. Hamburg - Museum für Völkerkunde, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe 196. Dresden - Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde 182. Leipzig - Museum für Völkerkunde 87. Leiden - Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde 98. London - British Museum 700. New York - Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art 163. Oxford - Pitt-Rivers Museum/ Pitt-Rivers country residence, Rushmore in Farnham/Dorset 327. Stuttgart - Linden-Museum-Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde 80. Vienna - Museum für Völkerkunde 167. The Western museums will, with a new realism, perhaps understand that they are not bound to defend the past evils of colonialism and imperialism. They are however responsible for continuing to hold on to ill-gotten artefacts from the colonial period and for refusal even to discuss or disclose the number of items involved. Having liberated themselves from the colonial heritage, the Western museums would no longer need to invent explanations of fantasy to justify the possession of stolen goods. The museums of the Western nations would thus, for

the first time, become amenable to the idea of a true "Museum of Mankind" or "World Museum" to which all peoples and States will contribute and thus finally create a truly Universal Museum, in the true sense of universality of governance, contribution and representation. This will not be the kind of imperialist and neo-colonialist museum which is only "universal" from the fact of having thousands of looted/stolen artefacts from the universe but only there to serve a few nations that have since the 17th century dominated mankind and the universe. Some of the authors of contributions seem to have followed Cuno's tone and style by heaping criticisms on their colleagues. Very little room is left for possible compromise. Attacks on Lord Renfrew which go as far as to consider his writings as sensational are clearly not conducive to achieving a compromise on the question of unprovenanced antiquities. The contributions to *Whose Culture?* seem to have been written a long time ago and therefore could not have taken account of recent events. From this book, there is very little mention of the recent wave of restitutions to Egypt, Ethiopia, Italy, Greece and other countries. As usual, there is no discussion on demands for restitution from other African countries. One cannot help feeling that there is no attempt in this book to offer anything new. Cuno could surely not hope to introduce a new perspective with his introduction that abandons all attempts to understand opposing views and with articles that are several years old. This book is surely not the last word on the debate on restitution and the location of antiquities but one would hope it is the last of its kind. Cuno's recent book, *Who Owns Antiquity?* (2008) was met with many serious criticisms which have not yet been adequately answered.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Thereafter the same author wrote articles that reproduced similar arguments⁽⁶⁶⁾. The publication of *Whose Culture?* (2009) so soon makes us wonder what the real aims of these writings are. Peter Stone, in reviewing Cuno's *Who Owns Antiquity?* spoke for all of us in the rest of the world, outside the "universal" or "encyclopaedic" museums when he made this statement: "I assume that many will hope and some I know will pray that this book represents the last death throes of a failed traditional world-view: the dominance of the many by the (very) few; the dominance of a Western scientific tradition over all others; the dominance of a closed view clinging, perhaps subconsciously, to what can only be described as colonial oppression. Perhaps if a dinosaur could have written a book arguing against its extinction, it would have read like this". Could this statement also be applicable to *Whose Culture?* which is a companion volume to *Who Owns Antiquity?* Kwame Opoku, 1 May, 2009.

The international controversy over who "owns" antiquities has pitted museums against archaeologists and source countries where ancient artifacts are found. In his book *Who Owns Antiquity?*, James Cuno argued that antiquities are the cultural property of humankind, not of the countries that lay exclusive claim to them. Now in *Whose Culture?*, Cuno assembles preeminent museum directors, curators, and scholars to explain for themselves what's at stake in this struggle--and why the museums' critics couldn't be more wrong. Source countries and archaeologists favor tough cultural property laws restricting the export of antiquities, have fought for the return of artifacts from museums worldwide, and claim the acquisition of undocumented antiquities encourages looting of archaeological sites. In *Whose Culture?*, leading figures from universities and museums in the United States and Britain argue that modern nation-states have at best a dubious connection with the ancient cultures they claim to represent, and that archaeology has been misused by nationalistic identity politics. They explain why exhibition is essential to responsible acquisitions, why our shared art heritage trumps nationalist agendas, why restrictive cultural property laws put antiquities at risk from unstable governments--and more. Defending the principles of art as the legacy of all humankind and museums as instruments of inquiry and tolerance, *Whose Culture?* brings reasoned argument to an issue that for too long has been distorted by politics and emotionalism. In addition to the editor, the contributors are Kwame Anthony Appiah, Sir John Boardman, Michael F. Brown, Derek Gillman, Neil MacGregor, John Henry Merryman, Philippe de Montebello, David I. Owen, and James C. Y. Watt.