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## Editorial Introduction: Global Conversations: Museums, Diplomacy, and Provenance

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# Editorial Introduction

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Editors for Archaeological Heritage and Ethics

## Global Conversations: Museums, Diplomacy, and Provenance

Museum creation and reconfiguration are integral to the growing cultural heritage industry. A century ago the museum was a treasure trove of antiquities collected from adventures abroad—boxes filled with objects that represented places and people of colonial conquests and imperial ambitions. These objects became the foundation for western scholarship and the museum was an important hub for intellectual life. While Google's Cultural Institute suggests that museums can (and will) function in cyberspace, the success of the project rests on museum participation as well as the objects chosen to represent an institution's virtual presence. Today museums focus on educational and institutional relationships, especially international collaboration. Within these networks, objects contribute to the exchange of ideas as well as the power of culture in defining international relations.

The Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE) (McClellan 2012) is the brainchild of the Tourism Development and Investment Company (TDIC). Here three museums and a performing arts venue define the cultural landscape. In anticipation of future tourism to the region the TDIC aims to transform Saadiyat into one of the world's most exciting destinations (Saadiyat Cultural District 2013). The Master Plan features information on *The Zayed National Museum*, set to open in 2016, which showcases the history and culture of the UAE. In addition, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the Louvre Abu Dhabi will showcase Middle Eastern and universal artistic traditions, while simultaneously receiving the imprimatur of two of the world's leading institutions.

The justification for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (completion scheduled for 2017) appears on the Master Plan website: "The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will move beyond a definition of global art premised on geography by focusing on the interconnected dynamics of local, regional, and international art centres as well as their diverse historical contexts and sources of creative inspiration. In realising this endeavour, the museum will acknowledge and celebrate the specific identity derived from the cultural

traditions of Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates, as well as other countries comprising the Middle East, even as it pioneers a novel, visionary model that will redefine the art-historical canon" (Saadiyat Cultural District 2013). The exhibitions will brand artistic canons as not only local, but also specific to the current boundaries of the UAE. In so doing, the UAE contextualizes the national model at a regional level.

While the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will showcase local cultural identities and networks, the Louvre Abu Dhabi will celebrate global themes: "Louvre Abu Dhabi will be the first *universal museum* in the Arab world. Born of an agreement between the governments of Abu Dhabi and France, the Louvre Abu Dhabi will display art, manuscripts and objects of historical, cultural and sociological significance. [B]ut universal themes and common influences will be highlighted to illustrate similarities arising from shared human experience transcending geography, nationality and history" (Saadiyat Cultural District 2013). Here, the global is defined as a "shared human experience," a sort of cultural ambassador crossing boundaries and connecting people through art and history. In both cases—local and global—the chosen medium is the object. In seeking objects for display at these institutions, the UAE has many options, including long-term loans from public and private collections as well as the purchase and ownership of items.

How will Abu Dhabi realize the museum plan and navigate the current academic critiques of collecting institutions and trends in repatriation of illicit material culture? On a pragmatic level the government of the UAE has leveraged power in purchasing knowledge and association. They have contracted seasoned (and well paid) consultants from the British Museum and the Louvre. Professionals from these prestigious institutions offer guidance on exhibition design, acquisitions, visitor preferences, and educational mandates. Yet museum directors, curators, and educators in the Saadiyat Cultural District must balance the increasing prominence of museums as a tourist destination (Thyne 2001) with rigorous standards for high-quality exhibitions and programs.

At the core of many of these questions is the responsible collection of materials. Can we envision a collecting policy that would endorse private ownership and foster collaboration between public and private collections (local, national, and global)? The rules for how new purchases will be carried out, especially provisions for establishing the provenance (legal ownership history) of objects, could provide a new paradigm for the 21st-century museum. The UAE is not currently a state party to the 1970 *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* and thus the world will be watching how curators set the ethical guidelines for acquisitions. This is especially true as the UAE takes the helm in the global antiquities trade, demonstrated by the annual Abu Dhabi International Fine Art and Antiquities Fair and the growing number of galleries that sell such works.

The issue rests as much in the objects on display as on the networks that constitute the trade in antiquities. The foreword to the proceedings from the 2011 conference “Building National Museums in Europe 1750–2010” describes the current situation: “It is a contested billion-dollar cultural industry creating, negotiating and reinforcing ideas of values, belonging and ownership” (Building National Museums 2011). Repatriation has become a tool for leveraging cultural capital and international displays of power.

The situation in Turkey, as well as similar policies in Egypt, Greece, Italy, and many other countries, is as much about historical legacies as it is about ethical parameters and relationships. In the last two years Turkey has wielded unprecedented power to demand the return of materials from institutions in France, Germany, and the United States. In a number of cases, archaeological research—regardless of its relationship to the object(s) in question—has been threatened or suspended until an institution and/or nation state has agreed to conditions of repatriation. At a fundamental level, these situations often thwart cultural exchanges that museum exhibitions and archaeological research projects wish to promote. Ironically, the pursuit of archaeological context through scientific excavation has once again become entwined with museum protocols and international relations, yet now the

archaeological projects are rarely, if ever, transporting large quantities of materials abroad. To the contrary, materials from excavations are housed in-country, where international research teams focus on documentation and analysis.

In the following essay, Patty Gerstenblith provides us with a timely discussion of “the 1970 rule”—an ethical benchmark set by UNESCO for a terminus ante quem for collecting antiquities. This benchmark is responsible for much of the tension in the international museum community, especially as U.S. and European institutions navigate turbulent waters of repatriation claims and new purchases. The debate over museum acquisition is a lively one, as reflected by conflicting policies of the Association of Art Museum Directors and organizations such as the Archaeological Institute of America and research institutions that uphold the 1970 date.

Our view is that the success of the 21st-century museum, wherever it is located, will be measured not necessarily by the numbers of objects held, nor dollars spent, but by the inspirational value that enlivens the present with tangible, meaningful contributions to civic spaces and communities. This value will be derived from innovation in conservation, archaeological excavation, and digital technologies that provide historical and cultural meaning to the objects on display. Thus, the future of museums resides as much in creating destinations as it does in forging partnerships with cultural institutions and people actively engaged in research with commitments to long-term cultural relations and educational opportunities.

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