

CUNO AND CREDIBLE MUSEUMS

James Cuno: "There is not a credible museum in this country that has an object in it that it knows to have been stolen from someplace else."

This statement attributed to Cuno must surely rank as one of the most blatant misrepresentations of our times. <http://safecorner.savingantiquities.org/>

Cuno and others have engaged a lot of people with the concept of “universal museum” which they now refer to as “encyclopaedic museum”. See “Encyclopaedic Museum Starter Kit”, <http://www.artnose.org/museumstarter.htm>

Now we have to make a distinction between “credible museums” and “non-credible museum”. Or is it “incredible museums”? What precisely does Cuno mean by “credible museums” remembering that recent events have shown that major and prestigious museums in the USA cannot be trusted to have acquired their antiquities in an entirely legal mode. The return of stolen antiquities to Italy is surely incontrovertible evidence that many museums do not shrink from acquiring interesting antiquities even though there is doubt about their provenance. Cuno’s own writings and statements will tend to support this view.

In his interview with Richard Lacayo, Cuno makes extraordinary statements which reveal some of the relationship between the museums and the illicit traffic in antiquities ([A Talk With: James Cuno](#), January 27, 2008; [More Talk: with James Cuno](#), January 28, 2008). In answer to a question about the relationship between illicit traffic and the fact that the purchases by museums encourage the illicit traffic, this is the response of Cuno:

More is lost to national disaster, economic development and war than is lost to the art market. Museums are a small part of this problem. If it's going to be stopped it can't be stopped by museums not acquiring.

Looting is a not a casual past time. It's desperate people in desperate circumstances who loot. They risk their lives. Museums recognize that there is a relationship between the marketplace and looting, and we want to distance ourselves from it as much as we can and still preserve these things that will otherwise be lost. How do you behave responsibly in this realm? There has to be a package of responses. One part of the package is partage. And another part has to do with allowing museums to reasonably acquire.”

So after praising looting, Cuno pleads for the right of the museums to acquire objects with dubious provenance. The moral or ethical question does not appear to be relevant for Cuno. It may be interesting to quote Roger Atwood’s assessment here:

Cuno's call to bring back partage is worthy and constructive (I make a similar suggestion in my own book, [Stealing History](#)). But then he reasserts the

prerogative of museums to acquire looted antiquities. Give it to them legally or they may have no choice but to take it illegally, seems to be the message here. No one can blame him for wanting museums to have the best material available, but does he realize how much he poisons his own argument in favor of legal mechanisms for acquiring antiquities by defending the illegal ones? Only a few pages before his plea for partage, he makes this hair-raising statement: "If undocumented antiquities are the result of looted (and thus destroyed) archaeological sites, that there is still a market for them anywhere is a problem. Keeping them from U.S. art museums is not a solution, only a diversion." Roger Atwood, "Insider-Guardians of Antiquity?"

<http://www.archaeology.>

Cuno tries in his book, *Who owns Antiquity?* to deflect the serious objections archaeologists have against the illicit trade which they see as being encouraged by the acquisition methods of the museums, by creating an opposition between the scholars and nation states:

“The real argument over the acquisition of undocumented (unprovenanced) antiquities is not what it appears to be. It is not really between art museums and archaeologists, about the protection of archaeological record from looting and illicit trafficking in antiquities.. It is between museums and modern nation-states and their nationalist claims on that heritage. Archaeologists are part of the arguments as allies of those states (or “source” nations; those with ancient remains within their jurisdiction). Archaeologists encourage the institution of nationalist retentionist cultural property laws, believing them to be important to the protection of archaeological sites”(pxviii)

Leaving aside the above points, is Cuno telling us that the debate about the museums and their methods of acquisition which has been going on for a considerable number of decades, is about nothing? Have we all been chasing a phantom? Is Cuno’s own book, *Who owns Antiquity?* not intended to support the museums in this debate against those he calls “nationalist retentionists? See <http://www.afrikanet.>

So what about all those books, articles and the laws about looting, plunder? Have these efforts been aimed at a non-existent acquisition by museums and dealers?

Cuno has taken the position that until a museum has been caught it should be considered as innocent even though everybody is complaining about its methods of acquisition. What about taking a more honourable position? Could the museums prove beyond all reasonable doubt that all they have in their stock have been legally acquired?

In this case the burden of proof should be on the museums since they are the only ones with any knowledge about what they have. The public has no idea about what the museums have in their depots. It would not be reasonable to

expect outsiders to prove the legality or otherwise of the acquisition of antiquities by museums. How many museums have a complete inventory of all their acquisitions?

We know for sure that most of the Benin bronzes now in British, American and German museums were stolen by British soldiers when they invaded Benin in 1897. All those working in the cultural sector have known about this ever since they were stolen. Can Cuno now pretend that the plaque that is now in the Art Institute of Chicago did not come from the loot by the British soldiers or that when the AIC acquired it they had no idea where it came from?

If there have not been any illegal acquisitions by “credible museums” as Cuno would have us believe, for whom was the [Association of Art Museum Directors](#) drawing the guidelines which were issued recently? Was all this only for the “non-credible museums”? In which category would Cuno put Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and Princeton University’s Art Museum which have recently been made to return antiquities acquired in dubious circumstances from Italy?

Cuno’s formulation contains a lot of escape routes for the museums. When does a museum know that an object it has is of dubious provenance? When its director knows or when the curator or the acquisition department knows?

Cuno has been repeating many of his questionable statements recently. I do not know whether he shares the philosophy of the rhetoric school which believes that the more you repeat a statement, even if all the facts prove the contrary, the more you gain credibility. See A Satirical Approach to the “Universal Museum,” <http://www.modernghana.com> It reminds one of the statesmen who repeat that life in a certain country is better even though the news media, including the television programme on which they speak, report about many people dying there everyday.

The major museums cannot escape from their history nor the history of the specific objects found therein unless they re-write history as Cuno’s colleague, Neil MacGregor, Director, British Museum has been advocating. Scholars and museum directors must accept the history of the violent and unscrupulous acquisition methods used in the past by mighty States against weaker ones in depriving them of their cultural objects which are now in the museums of the West.

The task of our generation should be to find a reasonable solution that enables all sides to continue their history and at the same time provide the world adequate information about cultural objects. In this process, we may through mutual arrangements decide where important objects should be kept but arrogant and insensitive statements by Cuno and co will not help anyone, least of all, those countries where most of the illegally acquired cultural objects are to be found at present.

Kwame Opoku, 20 June, 2008.