

Paper delivered at “The Dynamics of Museum Ethics; Native Peoples and Ethnographic Collections,” a symposium sponsored by The Peabody Museum and The Harvard Native American Program

“The Ethic of Collecting”

April 30, 1993

Before I begin to share my heartfelt thoughts I want to look at some snapshots of the history from which we emerge, snapshots that depict the horrors and humiliations that the indigenous peoples of this land have endured.

Picture:

A 1920s missionary poster listing the rules:

Come out of your blanket.

Cut your hair.

Learn the value of a hard-earned dollar.

Do not waste your money on giveaways.

Believe that property and wealth are signs of divine approval.

Speak the language of your white brother.

Send your children to school to do likewise.

Do not go to Indian dances or to the medicine men.¹

Picture:

The systematic slaughter of 40 million buffalo and General Sherman’s strategy: “Kill all the buffalo and the Indian will follow.”

Picture:

Forced removal of children from families to boarding schools, where they were beaten for speaking their mother tongue, and where many died with broken hearts.

Picture:

Nearly 400 formal treaties made from the late 1700s to the late 1800s in conjunction with the forced relocation and division of hundreds of Indian nations continue to be violated.²

Picture:

The outlawing of ceremonies in pain of punitive action. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs stated that “the Indian ceremonies were obscene spectacles that needed to be stamped out.”³

The war continues today—not with soldiers who carry guns but with lawyers who carry briefcases. The Supreme Court *G-O Road* decision, *Smith* decision, and *Lyng* decision are robbing traditional peoples of their culture and do not reflect either the Bill of Rights or the Fourteenth Amendment.

The history of the United States arose out of these cruel treatments, humiliating policies, and Supreme Court precedents. Aggressive behavior against a highly spiritual peoples to me is indicative of ignorance and greed. Statements in educational materials, by the media, and at museums of natural history—in fact, the very presence of the contemporary market for Indian art—are proof of the denial of this shameful history. Systematic cultural genocide of the American Indian has fostered racist attitudes and the rationalization of the right to ownership of materials belonging to those cultures.

We have gathered today to discuss ethics. It is about time.

My invitation to speak today came with a suggestion that I might want to share my thinking about the ethics of private collecting—as my work and commitment lie personally as well as professionally in issues of the private sector. However, instead of biting into the suggested title (“Tribal Use vs. Private Abuse: The Case for Return”) I have decided to speak to the ethic of collecting. The difference between ethics and ethic is the difference between looking into what is moral or immoral within the province of collecting as opposed to looking at collecting as an ethic of choice.

Repatriation from the public sector, as you well know, is a law—hence no longer an issue. Why NAGPRA must be met, how it can be met with integrity, and how this will impact both tribe and museum is the topic of today’s forum, providing an opportunity for dialogue. NAGPRA, of course, does not directly impact the private sector. However, even though NAGPRA does not govern dealers, auctions houses, and collectors, repatriation of objects within the private sector is nonetheless relevant because there has been an outcry from natives and non-natives alike for the protection of grave sites and other sites, and the return of sacred materials of indigenous peoples. It is a movement outside of Congress. As such, it is beyond legislation; however, as with legislated activities, the movement can be met either with resistance or cooperation.

Sacred ritual objects continue to be looted at alarming rates, sold on the blackmarket, sold on “legitimate” auction blocs, bought and sold by “art” dealers, and bought by collectors. Most collectors are still ignorant of the distinction between art and sacred ritual material of living cultures. I emphasize *living cultures*. What does it mean to purchase spiritual material? Whose lives are impacted by that sale, by that purchase?

In 1978 two pothunters trespassed onto Hopi land, came across the mountain shrines of the Taalawtumsi, and took them. The cottonwood manifestations of spirit were made to initiate the young as Hopi. The thieves sold them for around \$1200 in the early 1980s. The collector who bought them now claims that when he heard that the FBI was looking for the shrines he chopped them up and burned them. He also says he had no idea of their importance; neither did the anthropologists nor the art dealers to whom the thieves went to find out about what they had stolen. Apparently the Taalawtumsi were so very intimate to traditional spiritual life that they had been a guarded and well-kept secret of the Hopi. They were hundreds of years old and held the knowledge needed for initiation, necessary for the continuity of Hopi culture.

Respect and moral behavior is not present and the continued ignorance of the public and of collectors supports petty thieves, generates a fine lifestyle for art dealers, and keeps auction houses thriving—at the cost of other cultures. The sale and purchase of sacred material exploits people who have been abused for centuries. Education is required.

Many Native Peoples have endured, but their ceremonies and customs are still threatened by the law, politicians, logging and mining interests, and the art market. Sacred instruments, materials, and languages that express perceptions and ways of life are still under siege. This may, however, be a moment in time when some of that which threatens to destroy indigenous cultures can be stopped. A few key circumstances have recently developed: Consciousness is on the rise; environmental destruction, long prophesized by Native leaders, is taking place; many Grandmothers and Elders support intercultural teaching; and NAGPRA and public institutions are poised to positively impact public education.

I would like to focus on some fundamental differences between the indigenous culture of this continent and the present dominant culture with the hope of furthering that understanding and respect. Perceptions, attitudes, and points of view are of major significance and also speak to the ethic of collecting.

Language may be one of the largest challenges to overcome in attempting to comprehend basic cultural differences. English does not have the vocabulary to accurately, or adequately, reflect the sophisticated communal native societies’ points of view of life and without words we may have limited comprehension—but try we must nonetheless. The English language, with its

abundance of nouns, reflect a cultural attitude. Particular to Anglo perception is that human beings are separate from other living things. Life is objectified, and the vocabulary represents this. Therefore, what Indian peoples understand to be manifestations of the Cosmos, for example, are called in English “works of art.” Kachinas, life spirit to the Hopi, are called “masks” and are often described by dealers and auction houses simply as “important” or “very important.”

In the hundreds of American Indian languages still in existence generic words such as “art,” “religion,” “environment,” “ecology,” “ownership,” “property,” and so forth do not exist. There are, however, the winged, the four-legged, and the tall relatives, who are all our relations. Each thought is a prayer; every action is a gift; giving abundantly is an indication of wealth; honor is an indication of wisdom; and all of life is a sacred blessing. The ritual instruments or paraphernalia used in ceremony hold the instructions, the knowledge, and are the connection to spirit.

I share with you some thoughts about “art” from the native perspective:

- Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell said, “You are born with a certain kind of soul in you, it’s something I don’t think you should imprison or hold back. Art, in the Indian way of believing, is a gift you are born with.”⁴

- Arthur Amiotte, a Lakota artist and teacher, acknowledges in his traditional heart that there is no such thing as “art” and objects to “definitions,” but I asked him, “If there *were* such a thing as ‘art’ and you *were* to define it, how would you?” To which he replied, “Art is one of the symbol manifestations of the sacred having a living presence.”⁵

- And Rick Hill, (Tuscarora) Asst. Director of Public Programs at the National Museum of the American Indian, said, “There is no word for art in the Tuscarora language. Art is the glue that holds our traditions together, our ancestors, our future. It is how we tell our people who carries the power.”⁶

- Reuben Snake, spiritual leader of the Winnebago of Nebraska, says that rational linear thinking separates us from the sacred. Definitions are particular to rational linear thinking. (I have heard Reuben refer to certain people as “recovering rational linear thinkers” and “recovering anthropologists.”)

Now let’s look at some of the English definitions of art and at how the dominant culture perceives, teaches, and sells art:

- Art: n. The power of performing certain actions as especially as acquired by experience, study, or observation: skill, dexterity. (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*)

- Art: n. A systematic application of knowledge or skill effecting a desired result. (*Black’s Law Dictionary*)

- Art: n. A branch or division of learning. (*Thorndike Barnhart*)

- Art: n. The activity of creating beautiful things; works, such as paintings or poetry, resulting from such activity. (*Microsoft Word AHED*)

- Art: n. 1. Painting, drawing, and sculpture. We study art at school. 2. The works made by artists; paintings, drawings, and sculptures. We went to an exhibit of American Indian art at the museum.” (*The Macmillan Dictionary for Children*)

- Sotheby’s does not define art but the 1992 auction catalogue was titled Important American Indian Art with “Ceremonial Objects” and “Prehistoric Pottery” (which are most often grave goods) side by side with “Jewelry” and “Textiles.” Atop each lot number and description was written “Property of . . .” They described “A Sioux Ceremonial Dance Shield” as “possibly associated with the Ghost Dance” and the “Property from the Estate of Eugene Sussel.”

Some art historians do acknowledge the complexities and possibilities of this subject. H. W. Janson, in *The History of Art for Young People*, asks: “What is art? Why does man create? Few such questions provoke such heated debate and provide so few satisfactory answers.”

What I see are Indigenous Peoples who have been blessed with an extraordinary aesthetic, who have created clothing, moccasins, toys, blankets, ceramic storage pots, water vessels, and so forth with as much care and beauty as they have done with the creation of sacred spiritual instruments, paraphernalia, and life spirit. Because all of these objects share the artistic beauty and the awe-inspiring transcendence that accompanies many great works of the fine arts, they are all sold as “art” and have become part of the “art market,” a commodity. Lack of curiosity and understanding by collectors does not encourage a delineation between that which is artifact from that which is sacred life spirit. To a different point, but also heart-wrenching, is that consumers indifferently ignore the fact that large quantities of the material that sells in galleries and auctions are spoils of war: moccasins and clothing that have been removed from the bodies of women, men, and children.

American Indian artifacts, grave goods, spiritual paraphernalia, and life spirit have been held under the aegis of “science,” in the halls of “art and education,” or under the protection of the phrase of “humankind’s cultural patrimony,” to the pain and distress of the people of living cultures.

I ask the following questions:

- Is it so hard to understand that it is inaccurate to call something “art” when it is “one of the symbol manifestations of the sacred, having a living presence” and it connects people to spirit?7

- Is it so hard to understand that some of what is called “Fine Indian Art” and treated as remnant collectibles from dead cultures is essential ceremonial materials belonging to living cultures?

- Is it so hard to understand that the argument of “protecting cultural patrimony for posterity” is rational thinking of a dominant culture and interferes with the very purpose for which the material, which belongs to a living culture, was created?

- Is it possible that it is not lack of comprehension that is behind the refusal to respond to the simplest of these questions but rather that people are hiding behind unconscious and conscious agendas? The question “Who owns the past” is often asked in the media and debated by academicians; I ask “Who owns the present?”

In the United States of America television has become the most powerful educational vehicle of our society. Statistics are appalling: According to *Advertising Age*, 75% of commercial network advertising is paid for by only 100 corporations whose budgets range from 100 million to one billion dollars per year. It is estimated that the average viewer watches five hour of TV a day. This means that every year each viewer sees 21,000 commercials; the message 21,000 times a year is to buy more, to have more.⁸

We have become a society of addicts—television and comfort addicts, acquisition and consumption addicts. The act of collecting for many people is more important than that which is collected. So, without guilt, individuals are acquiring more and more material from oppressed living cultures. Separating cultures from their “art,” and at the same time separating spirit from that “art,” results in separating peoples from their cultural power. It is a systematic destruction of indigenous peoples; cultural genocide would not be an inaccurate phrase. What will it take to stop individuals, institutions, corporations, and nation-states from consuming indigenous cultures?

Materials continue to be removed from the more than three thousand Indigenous Nations on this planet, whose way of life is based on sharing, honor, and reverence. These are cultures that regard the dead as living, whose chosen “environmental” ethic is “deliberate underproduction,” a term used by environmentalist Jerry Mander. They are without the political or financial power to protect themselves from extinction. We are facing ethical considerations of collecting that are of global proportions.

The American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation is a educational organization and conduit liaison between tribes and institutions committed to assist in the return of sacred ceremonial material and life spirit to American Indians and natives of Hawaii and Alaska. Repatriation of sacred material reunites—physically, culturally, and spiritually—that which has

been separated from its source of origin, its essence, and its purpose, which is to unite life.

Repatriation is re-culturalization.

I have often been asked if I think the Elgin marbles should be returned. I am focused on the sacred material of the still-living native cultures of America, not on the Elgin Marbles and the like. I would, however, like to introduce Buckminster Fuller's thinking on this matter from his 1974 Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth:

Why not completely restore the great cities and buildings of antiquity and send back to them all their fragmented treasures now deployed in the world's museums. Thus, many whole eras will be reinhabited and experienced by an ever increasingly interested, well-informed, and inspired humanity. Thus, may all the world regain or retain its regenerative metaphysical mysteries.

I love the warmth, integrity, hope, spirit, humor, respect, perceptions, aesthetic, and beauty of the Native American cultures and people. I feel pain for the injustices that they have suffered and continue to endure.

I would like to end with a poem by writer and artist Ann Lee Walter (Pawnee/Otoe):

"I Have Bowed Before the Sun"

My name is "I am living."

My home is all directions and is everlasting.

Instructed and carried to you by the wind,

I have felt the feathers in pale clouds and bowed before the Sun
who watches me from a blanket of faded blue.

In a gentle whirlwind I was shaken,
made to see on earth in many ways.

And when in awe my mouth fell open,

I tasted a fine red clay.

Its flavor has remained after uncounted days.

This gave me cause to drink from a crystal stream
that only I have seen.

So I listened to all its flowing wisdom
and learned from it a Song—

This song the wind and I
have since sung together.

Unknowing, I was encircled by its water and cleansed.

Naked and damp, I was embraced and dried
by the warmth of your presence.
Dressed forever in the scent of dry cedar,
I am purified and free.
And I will not allow you to ignore me.
I have brought to you a gift.
It is all I have but it is yours.
You may reach out and enfold it.
It is only the strength in the caress of a gentle breeze,
but it will carry you to meet the eagle in the sky.
My name is "I am living." I am here.
My name is "I am living." I am here.

1 Crow Dog, Mary and Erdoes, Richard. *Lakota Woman*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 31.

2 Mander, Jerry. *In the Absence of the Sacred*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991), p. 199. (For excellent information about treaties, see *Exiled in the Land of the Free*, edited by Oren Lyons and John Mohawk (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1992), specifically, chapter 7: "The Application of the Constitution to American Indians" by Vine Deloria, Jr. Esq.)

3 Op. cit., Crow Dog and Erdoes, p. 61.

4 The *Indian Trader* newspaper, March 1993,

5 Recurssos Symposium, "Plains Indians," Santa Fe, NM, March 1993.

6 Ibid.

7 Arthur Amiotte

8 Op. cit., Mander, p. 78.