

Contemporary Indian Issues, The Native American Film Festival and Media Celebration, Lincoln Center, New York
“Current Issues Facing the Native American”
June 6-7, 1992

In the spring of 1991, the Hopi and Navajo nations requested Sotheby's Auction House to remove sacred "masks" from sale at the Sotheby's Annual Indian Arts Auction. Their requests were ignored. On the morning of May 21st, I went to Sotheby's for the purpose of purchasing and then returning the three sacred objects. Come lunchtime, and a lot of bidding later, the masks were recognized, by state and federal law, as mine, as "owned" by me. To me, it was also lunchtime and it was certainly a lot of bidding later, however I was not their "owner", they did not "belong" to me; I was their guardian. I did see my responsibility to them until their return. I did not see that in opening that door a powerful wind blew through and I was along for the ride!

The next morning, an article by Rita Reif in the *New York Times* accurately headlined, "BUYER VOWS TO RETURN MASKS TO INDIANS". This article was the first of dozens of newspaper and magazine articles, and radio news interviews about the event. Papers correctly reported my statements: "it is the right thing to do" and "there is a difference between that which is sacred to the ceremonial life of a living culture and that which we call 'art'" and "sacred material culture should not be bought and sold."

A dialogue was opened in the art world along with the eyes of many art collectors. And fundamental questions have surfaced: What is art? What is sacred? What is ownership? What can we own? What do we own? What can we sell? The ethical issues surrounding the questions compel examination.

The phone calls, letters, faxes, and telegrams of thanks were extraordinary. Many American Indians contacted me to express gratitude; some said they were surprised by the act and most non-Indians expressed relief and joy at the morality of my actions: it was about time, many said, that somebody stood up and did something right.

As the weeks passed and I absorbed the responses, I felt inspired. Each person, in one way or another, was applauding correct action. Almost all communicated a desire to participate in the repatriation of sacred life. I understand many American Indians recognize this action as beyond ego and a blessed opportunity for a new partnership.

It is out of these energies that THE AMERICAN INDIAN RITUAL OBJECT REPATRIATION FOUNDATION has been born: a partnership of Indians and non-Indians working together to bring spirit home.

The founding Board of Trustees is:

- Walter Echo-Hawk (Pawnee). Mr. Echo-Hawk is a senior staff attorney for the Native American Rights Fund, in Boulder CO. and was involved in the drafting of the 1990 Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. He is currently in the forefront of the fight for religious freedom for Native Americans.
- Rick Hill (Tuscarora). Mr. Hill is Director of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM. Rick has published numerous articles on the desecration of burial grounds and co-chairs the Committee on Museum-Native American Collaboration at the American Association of Museums.
- Carol Master. Dr. Master is on the Board of Directors and on the Ritual Committee of the Harvard Hillel Children's School in Cambridge, Mass. Her ability to translate intuitive action into word has been invaluable.
- Reuben Snake (Winnebago). Mr. Snake, a spiritual leader of the Winnebago Nation, is Dean of The Center for Research and Cultural Exchange at The Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. A major participant in the Freedom of Religion Act passed in 1978.
- Marty Sullivan. Dr. Sullivan, Director of the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, is co-chair with Rick Hill of the Committee on Museum-Native American Collaboration. He facilitated the return of a wampum belt to the Iroquois in 1989 and the Heard Museum, under his direction, recently returned a sacred shield to Hopi.
- Lucinda Ziesing is a producer and teacher. She is currently President of Landing Zone Inc. A teacher at Sarah Lawrence until 1791 Ms. Ziesing was at the Rough Rock Demonstration School in Chinle, Arizona in 1969.
- And myself.

The American Indian Object Repatriation Foundation is the first and currently only organization committed to the repatriation of sacred object to American Indian Nations. We will be forging new paths to accomplish our goals. I believe the heart of success is in the teaching. Ignorance is the enemy from which festers distrust and abuse, it is from knowledge and understanding that respect grows. Hence, educating, imparting

as much information as possible and permissible about sacred material culture and the importance of sacred life to American Indians (indeed the importance to the earth and her people) will be the seeds from which right-mindedness, and right-behavior grow.

So, the purposes and goals of AIRORF are:

To be a conduit through which gifts of sacred objects from collectors and other donors are returned to their American Indian Nation of origin. Donors are eligible to receive the tax deductions allowable by law (a financial incentive for those who need it). AIRORF will ensure that each return is made in accordance with ceremonial requirements of the receiving nation or entity.

The key word here is sacred. The Foundation will only accept gifts of sacred material culture. Material culture is "life-spirit": the physical embodiment of a belief of a particular culture. "Sacred" material culture brings us up a notch, so to speak; and who determines sacredness?

Regional Advisors are needed by AIRORF from the 12 regions across the country. In meetings with leaders on particular reservations in the southwest, it is clear that some tribes will require their own representation. The advisor or representative will assist in determining from which tribe an object originated. They will then contact a clan or society within that tribe or nation for advice and direction. The spiritual leader or leaders, chief, elder, grandmother and/or matriarch will determine its "sacredness". The advisors or representatives will continue to liaison during the repatriation process, if need be. Confirmation of sacred nature and desirability of receipt will be required before a gift is accepted by the Foundation from a donor.

I would like to tell you a story: After the auction at Sotheby's one newspaper person asked: "With the inter-tribal problems in Hopi, how are you going to decide to whom to give the masks?". I was genuinely surprised by the question, it seemed obvious to me that it is not up to me to decide - it is up to the Hopi. How could I possibly know? I told her, as I told the Hopi, that they must let me know to whom or where the Kachinas must go and that whatever they all agreed upon was fine with me. Their agreement, their consensus, was my only requirement. I had no intention of ending up with a call from an irate person from Hopi telling me I had done it wrong and the Kachina's were returned to the wrong person or group. The Hopi called back in two weeks. The conference call was

with representatives from two out of the three Mesas, the tribal council president and preservation officer and the Kachina Clan Chief of the First Mesa. (I have since been told that it was a miracle for those particular people to have been in one room together!) They agreed that the Kachina were to be returned to Herman Lewis. He is the 84-year-old Kachina Clan Chief of the First Mesa. So, the Kachinas came to Santa Fe with me, and on July 4 (which was no accident either) Herman Lewis, his lieutenant and nephew arrived from Walpi, Hopi. After many prayers, good lunch and much talk they drove Ahola and Koyemsii home.

I tell you this story because I am surprised at the numbers of people who have asked, suggested, or assumed that I would go to the non-Indian "experts" (anthropologists, museum curators, professors) and that they would be able to tell me what to do. It is astonishing that non-Indians do not naturally consider and recognize Indians as the experts of their own culture and spiritual life. If Indians don't know what is sacred and how to handle it, who does?? Who knows about what, is the first "educating" that needs to be done.

AIRORF will publish books and pamphlets about the significance of sacred material culture and the importance of their return home. We will sponsor seminars and conferences. The challenges inherent in the repatriation movement will be focused upon in both forms.

Establishing procedures for repatriation from the private sector will be a major contribution for AIRORF to make. We will also happily assist museums in locating and contacting those American Indians needed to authenticate and/or escort home sacred objects identified for repatriation. To this end we will create The Travel Fund to provide matching grants sharing costs of travel from nation to museum for spiritual leaders and others essential to a proper and respectful return. ["The Travel Fund" was dropped as a project by AIRORF's charter Board of Trustees at the second Annual Meeting because funds were available (and still are) for tribal representatives to visit museums by applications to the Department of the Interior as part of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.]

In addition, and I think this is extremely important, we are establishing The Provenance Committee whose members are American Indian curatorial research

associates. Gloria Lomahaftewa, Hopi/Choctaw, Assistant to Director for Native American Relations at the Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ acted as Provenance Advisor for AIRORF. Collectors who believe they are in possession of a sacred object may contact AIRORF with inquiries. The associates will research and provide the collector with a report that will include as much historic provenance as possible, the spiritual significance that can be shared, as well as other pertinent curatorial information. These collectors will now have a place to go to find out what they have -and I suspect most don't have the foggiest notion. [This approach was modified over the years; specific cases determined our approaches more often than not].

Once again the idea is to educate. I trust that collectors who come to understand about that which they covet to reconsider when better informed and if not, at least they will hopefully be more conscious.

If the auctions houses stop selling sacred items, if collectors do not purchase sacred objects or participate in repatriation, the market place will be changed forever. It is currently one of the most offensive exploitations of Native American peoples.

The Repatriation Foundation will also be a resource to American Indian Nations preparing to receive sacred material culture. The consideration and advice of trustees Rick Hill, Reuben Snake, and Walter Echo-Hawk as respected religious, legal and organizational leaders, who will address problems and questions about repatriation facing all nations at this time, will be invaluable. Rick Hill has spoken about the priority of publishing guidelines, models and approaches, for American Indian Nations faced with this enormous challenge. This must be done.

A recent milestone: Last October AIRORF's not-for-profit application was submitted to New York State. Shortly thereafter, an invitation was extended for us to petition for a Provisional Charter which are usually reserved for museums, libraries, and historical societies; the Foundation's Provisional Charter was granted by the Board of Regents of New York State on April 29, 1992.

This means is that New York State recognizes the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation as an institution of transition and education. The New York State Education Department is looking at us to help establish standards and procedures for the repatriation of sacred objects. Our standards and procedures potentially become models for future organizations across the country.

Additionally and for your information:

Reuben Snake is sponsored by and representing AIRORF in Brazil at the Earth Summit Conference. He is participating on a panel "Earth Ethics" organized by the Center for International Cooperation.

Also, AIRORF has been invited to organize one of *Through the Flower's* monthly seminars in Santa Fe. August 19th, a few days before Indian Market to address the distinction between art and sacred object.

Thank you for your attention. Brochures are available. Any contributions, money, ideas, prayers, or sacred material culture, will be received gratefully and with thanks.