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# Antiquities Theft: The Role of the Museum in Modern Symbolic Violence

Meredith M. Amato  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Antiquities Theft: The Role of the Museum in Modern Symbolic Violence

## **Abstract**

Humans have been collecting artifacts for centuries, whether it is for their aesthetic value or for the acquisition of knowledge. However, these artifacts have, in most cases, been taken without permission from the countries of origin. Today, museums are struggling with the issue of repatriation and many refuse to return their priceless possessions. Western museums and their supporters are arguing that repatriation will put the artifacts in danger and hurt the chances for humanity to learn from them. The arguments of these museums are an attempt of symbolic violence on non-Western nations, who are seen as unfit or unable to care for their own history.

## **Keywords**

antiquities theft, symbolic violence, museums

## **Disciplines**

Legal History | Museum Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## **Comments**

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Meredith Amato

Antiquities Theft:

### The Role of the Museum in Modern Symbolic Violence

How would Americans feel if the only surviving copy of the Declaration of Independence were taken by a foreign museum and put on display? More than likely, the American government and people would ask, even demand for its safe and immediate return. After all, it is a symbol of this nation and an integral part of our culture, reminding us of who we are and why we should be proud to be Americans. Obviously, it would be deemed a crime and efforts would be made to immediately have the document returned. And yet, museums are holding artifacts from foreign nations against the wishes and decrees of the origin countries to this very day. The theft of antiquities has been going on for millennia, but ever since the dawn of the antiquarian phase of archaeology in the early 1700s, in which Europeans informally excavated for aesthetically pleasing objects, there has been an ever-growing desire and demand for ancient artifacts from countries like Turkey, Iraq, Greece, and Egypt (Lecture Dr. Benjamin Luley 9-5-18). Western museums have acquired these artifacts over the centuries from explorers and collectors, and proudly display them as part of human history. However, what is not printed on the convenient little information plaques on the front of the display cases is the fact that the countries of origin have been asking for their return for decades. Since the day these artifacts were taken, the justification by the Western governments has been that these nations are unable to properly care for their history because they are not advanced enough. They are not Western, so they are not, in a sense, “civilized” enough to be given the privilege to hold their own artifacts. It is a modern attempt of symbolic violence by Western museums, keeping non-Western countries from being able to control their own history and learning about themselves and their heritage. History is one of the most important tools we have, and when artifacts are stolen, it also steals history from us.

In order to understand the violence behind artifact theft and how it perpetuates old stereotypes and relationships, one must understand the history behind it, how it works, and how it came to be so ingrained in the museum systems. Modern black-market antiquities theft is not the same as what it used to be. Hundreds of years ago, it was not even considered theft, as colonial powers would simply take objects and features they found aesthetically pleasing under the guise of protecting the artifacts. In “The Elgin Marbles Debate”, the author states that Lord Elgin, the English gentleman who removed a number of the marbles from the Parthenon, obtained a grant in 1801 to remove stones with inscriptions and figures. A copy of the grant, originally composed by the Ottoman government and written in Italian still survives today, but it is the only written evidence supporting the claim that Elgin took the marbles lawfully (“The Elgin Marbles Debate” 2013: 46-52). It is also said that Elgin’s secretary and others who were present in Athens claimed that the Acropolis was in poor condition and that removing the marbles would in fact preserve them. While the purchasing and acquiring of artifacts during the days of European colonialism was simply always legal because of the nature of the system, the line between legal and illegal in the modern trade network is much more blurred. The journey a piece of Egyptian jewelry or a Chinese statue takes today from illegal acquisition to being placed in the hands of a collector or museum curator is convoluted at best. Morag Kersel makes a comparison between the antiquities market and the illegal drug market. While the trafficking of drugs remains illegal throughout the entire transaction, because artifacts pass through multiple markets, there is a so-called transition from illegal to legal, which means that by the time the museum or collector receives the valuable object, the recipient is technically not involved in an illegal action (Brodie et al. 2006: 188-189). There are two distinct types of markets through which the artifacts travel in the trade network: archaeologically rich and transit markets.

Archaeologically rich markets are those in which the artifacts are first illegally acquired, most commonly by local people relying on their work digging up or stealing artifacts for subsistence, who then hand them over to a middle man. Often, the initial subsistence diggers receive very little in terms of profit; instead the middle man retains the majority of the profits during this transaction. Throughout this phase of the network, the artifact in question is still considered stolen and major criminal organizations have been created to handle the smuggling of the objects to the next phase. The transit market is characterized by an effort to avoid questioning the origins of the objects being transported in order to ensure that the artifacts are able to sit on full display in the most prestigious and respectable institutions and establishments. It is in the transit market in which the transition from illegal to legal is completed, when export licenses are acquired, and the artifact is able to be taken through customs. Once this action is completed, the artifact can officially enter the market as a legal object about which no or few questions are asked by potential buyers (Brodie, et al. 2006: 190-194).

This transition from illegal to legal is what makes the antiquities trade so tricky. It is extremely difficult in some cases to follow the journey of artifacts and identify who is responsible for their theft. When museums or collectors complete the transaction in the final stage of the market, they are not implicit because technically the objects are legally purchased. Curators are therefore let off the hook and not considered responsible for the theft of the artifacts in their possession. What this does is ignore the demand pole of the supply and demand chain that drives the antiquities trade. Instead, only those who commit the actual theft of the artifacts; the poor men and women who dig up these artifacts in order to survive, are demonized. However, how can this process survive without a demand? There needs to be a responsibility and

blame placed on these Western authority figures who desire these artifacts and turn the other way when faced with the legality and moral issues they create with their demands.

Museums by far are the greatest source of demand within this trade. Whether willingly or unwillingly, they have throughout the history of the antiquities trade played a major role in the perpetuation of the industry before 1970. In that year, one of the most important legal steps was taken by the world to protect cultural heritage: the holding of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention (Penn Museum). The treaty that came out of this convention stated that any country who joins can demand the return of any artifacts taken illegally after 1970, and also called for nations to create laws that prohibit the sale of cultural property and the intake of illegally acquired artifacts into museums (UNESCO 1970). Jennifer Neils explains how before 1970, museums acquired artifacts through two major ways: faculty-led excavations and the acceptance of gifts. These gifts were mainly donated by collectors who held close ties to museums. For example, a Harvard graduate named Edward Perry Warren would supply objects to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and donated to colleges and universities like Bowdoin College, the University of Chicago, and his alma mater itself throughout the early twentieth century. Faculty excavations also produced the bulk of many museums' collections, including that of the University of Michigan, which acquired nearly forty-five thousand artifacts from one site alone in Egypt, Karanis, from 1926 to 1936, even though finds were allegedly divided between the excavators and Egypt (Neils 2012: 543-544).

While these legal exchanges were conducted in the open and in full view of the public before the UNESCO Convention of 1970, in today's world museums must be more stealthy and subtle with their work. They turn to the dark world of smuggling, as did the Metropolitan Museum of Art did in their relationship with dealer Subhash Kapoor. Kanishk Tharoor, in his

article in *The Guardian*, details the arrest and work of Kapoor, who ran a massive network with prestigious museums for decades. Kapoor's arrest and the investigation into his network, nicknamed Operation Hidden Idol, has struck fear into other American museums who are now ensuring that their collections do not house illegal artifacts. He quotes author Jason Felch, who also claims that there is a parallel between the antiquities trade and the illegal drug market, because as long as there is a demand, there will be a supply (Tharoor 2015). If museums want to avoid the embarrassment of handing over their collections, it is in their best interests to follow the lead of agencies and programs like the Art Theft Archive and the Office of State Archaeologists, who provide a list of stolen artifacts and participate in campaigns to stop the illegal trade in its tracks, as stated by Karen Vitelli (Vitelli 1979: 83-85). She makes a comparison between the antiquities trade and Prohibition in the 1920s, explaining how the collection of artifacts is seen as a harmless, recreational crime to some, while for others it serves to fulfill an attraction to danger and profit (Vitelli 1979: 87).

The UNESCO Convention has put a massive pressure on museums to return artifacts that were acquired before 1970, but many still stand by their claims to ownership of the pieces. It is not hard to see how the idea that artifacts from these ancient civilizations were somehow indicative of an "otherness" and in some cases an "orientalism" can lead to a general acceptance of Western collectors and museums holding and displaying these artifacts. The draw of anomalies like these and the curiosity they spawn bring countless people each year to gawk and stare in wonder and awe at how these ancient societies were able to create these wonders without modern tools. Museums have become self-proclaimed protectors of valuable artifacts and claim that the nations of origin are unable or unwilling to care for their own history. This type of discourse is most apparent when talking about Lord Elgin's Parthenon Sculptures, as the fight

between Greece and Britain over their repatriation has been ongoing for centuries. One only has to look at the website for the British Museum, where the marbles are still currently being held. It is difficult simply to find any mention of the issue on the museum's website, but when one does finally find the page, they are greeted with a history of the Parthenon that focuses on its past use as a storage facility for gunpowder and the fact that the building is in ruins. The page makes it clear to point out that the marbles could never again be reattached to the Parthenon, and that their institution is "a unique resource for the world" and that "the Trustees firmly believe that there is a positive advantage and public benefit in having the Sculptures divided between two great museums" (British Museum). The museum even goes so far as to claim that the Greek government has refused to "consider borrowing or to acknowledge the Trustees ownership of the Parthenon sculptures" and that the British Museum is "the most generous lender in the world" (British Museum). This clear, very pointed and blunt language reveals the innate belief the museum holds that they are the proper home for the sculptures and that they have done nothing wrong. The discourse that is found on this page of the website reveals this argument in language that is easy to understand and persuades the reader to agree with their opinion. This was also the point of view of the president of the Archaeological Institute of America in 1926, Dr. R.V.D. Magoffin, who, while stating that the marbles should at some point be returned to Greece, they needed to stay in England at that time because the country of Greece was not in any state to properly care for them, citing the climate in Athens and the political instability in the Balkans at that time ("Returning Elgin Marbles to Athens Argued": 1926). The author cites a British archaeologist names Sir Charles Waldston, who argues that as long as it is not a possibility to return the sculptures to the Parthenon itself, "the Greek desire...is no argument at all for their return" ("Returning Elgin Marbles to Athens Argued": 1926). However, Dr. Magoffin does state



that the Greeks do possess “the willingness and scientific ability...to care properly for them” (“Returning Elgin Marbles to Athens Argued”: 1926). This short statement by the AIA, while containing this discourse against repatriation, remains professional and as unbiased as possible in its tone, except for the support of Lord Elgin’s actions, in which Dr. Magoffin claims that the artifacts would have been “destroyed” and that without their removal they would have been “mutilated” (“Returning Elgin Marbles to Athens Argued”: 1926). This word choice is the main point of biased discourse in the statement and reveals that over one hundred years after his actions, the British were still supporting and defending the steps Lord Elgin took while in Athens. They also create an image of Lord Elgin as almost a heroic figure who saved the marbles from a disastrous fate.

It is interesting to see a similarity in the discourse of these two sources, as both do bring up the other side of the debate. The British Museum, while not making the page itself easily accessible, does openly discuss the issue of repatriation and acknowledges that the Greek government has repeatedly asked for the marbles’ return. The fact that the museum openly tackles the metaphorical elephant in the room on a page that is fairly hidden on their website is extremely confusing and seems to suggest that they are trying to avoid controversy. If they can claim that they do acknowledge the repatriation issue and provide links to the Acropolis Museum in Athens, they can avoid accusations that they are trying to hide something, while also putting it on an obscure page on their website that takes a good amount of effort to find.

This discourse of an inability by the Greek government to care for their history and artifacts is analyzed by Dr. Tom Flynn, and a slightly humorous hypocrisy is brought to light as well. The aforementioned Acropolis Museum, sitting only steps from the Parthenon itself, is, as Dr. Flynn states, “a world-class museum with first-rate conservation and curatorial experience”

(Flynn). Dr. Flynn makes it clear in his argument that the Acropolis Museum is more than capable of caring for the marbles with their modern and state of the art facilities in which to hold and look after these vital pieces of Greek history (Flynn). Another facet of the discourse by the West against repatriation is that when Lord Elgin originally took the marbles, he was saving them from destruction because of the violent state the country of Greece was in at the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, Flynn claims that the marbles that remained on the Parthenon survived rather well into the modern day, while those that travelled to Britain were damaged heavily when museum staff tried to whiten them with wire brushes. In contrast, the marbles still in Greek possession have recently been carefully cleaned by high tech lasers, which did not threaten the priceless artifacts (Flynn). One can see the extreme difference in the language used in these opposing discourses. While Dr. Magoffin stated that the marbles would have been subjected to “unscientific handling” and that Lord Elgin did the world a “service” by removing the marbles from the Parthenon, Dr. Flynn uses terms like “first rate” and “masterful” to describe Greece’s attempt at providing safe and modern housing for their history.

The discourse that is found on the British Museum’s website is distressing for anyone fighting for repatriation, not just for the Parthenon Sculptures, but for artifacts in general, as this discourse has been accepted by a large majority of institutions. One of the few Western museums that actually stand on the side of repatriation is the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, better known as the Penn Museum. When one looks on Penn’s website, they find an easily accessible page that discusses their connection to the UNESCO Convention of 1970. The fact that Penn quotes this treaty on their website and also describes the treaties that have been instituted by the museum itself is beyond important. Penn set itself apart when, in 1978, they decreed that they would not accept any artifacts that were not acquired

legally, and would hold the right to refuse to loan artifacts to museums that were suspected of violating the UNESCO treaty. They point out that they were the first to take this stand in 1970, even before the convention occurred, and are proud to be the pioneering institution in the fight against the antiquities trade. This pride is evident with the mention of the Pennsylvania Declaration, that decreed that the museum would not purchase any object without proof of legality on April 1, 1970, and that “later that year, the United Nations issued the UNESCO Convention” (Penn Museum). The museum puts great emphasis on this timeline, showing that they were ahead of their time and continue to be at the forefront of the repatriation issue. When Penn is put side by side with the British Museum, it is hard to have any sympathy for the holders of the Parthenon Sculptures. The complete opposition between the two museums, from the text their website pages contain to the accessibility of the pages themselves shows just how deeply the British Museum wants to avoid the issue of repatriation at all costs.

The British Museum’s bold view of repatriation is not restricted to just other museums and collectors. Respected academics from across the Western world have argued against the return of artifacts like the Parthenon Sculptures, and a new discourse began to emerge towards the end of the twentieth century. With Dr. Magoffin in 1926, the argument was simply that Greece couldn’t properly care for their history. However, as Greece came out of political instability and began to create a state-of-the-art institution to house their artifacts, a new push was made by Western museums and academics to keep artifacts from returning home. In 1985, John Merryman wrote in the *Michigan Law Review* that Greece’s only argument for the return of the Sculptures is based on emotion, and claims that other than pulling a few heartstrings, the Greek government has no real evidence or grounds to support their side of the debate. Merryman calls emotional cases “weak” and “unreliable” and Greece the “sentimental favorite” (Merryman

1985: 1883). The emphasis of his argument is placed on “reasoning” and brings up the concept of the *deformation professionnelle*, which requires lawyers to be wary of emotional arguments (Merryman 1985: 1895). This word choice reveals that to this academic, the deeply personal reasoning the Greek people give for the return of the sculptures should not be trusted, and only what Western lawyers call “reasoned, principle grounds” should be given full attention and respect. Only if Greece abides by their rules and plays their game could they have any chance of being taken seriously (Merryman 1985: 1883). He uses three arguments to prove that the sculptures should not be returned, firstly that they are a part of “human culture” and are “an essential part of our common past” (Merryman 1985: 1895). The words human and common create an image of unity, which to the average reader could seem like a positive outcome. It brings them into the argument and makes them feel as though Merryman is arguing for their needs. However, what it also does is exclude any cultural identity, and breaks any connections between the artifacts and the original people who created them. To Merryman, it does not matter that the objects were created in Greece by Greeks. Arguing that artifacts belong to all of humanity, while at first glance brings every country and every culture into the equations, in reality excludes the country of origin, because it delegitimizes their arguments and rights to the artifacts (Merryman 1985: 1895).

Merryman’s second argument, while at first glance is much more simplistic and almost comical, is just as biased as the first. He claims that humans care about the sculptures because we enjoy them as art, as we do literature and music. He argues that as great art, they “enrich” our lives (Merryman 1985: 1895). However, how can one truly define “great art” and what does it mean to be “enriching”? When we think of fine, or great art, we usually think of Western paintings, literature, symphonies, and sculptures. We think of Michelangelo’s “David” or

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony or Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa". Great art is always extremely Eurocentric, and non-Western views of art are rarely ever taken into account. Calling the Parthenon Sculptures "great art" is calling them such from the view of the West, and not from the view of those who created it. Perhaps the "great art" that we want to hang in a museum for all the world to see is a deeply religious symbol to the creators and was made to never be seen by the public. Like his first argument, Merryman excludes the views of the countries of origin and argues that Western beliefs and views of non-Western art are the only way in which humans can view them (Merryman 1985: 1895).

In his final argument of the three, Merryman introduces the idea of cultural property, and explains that if nations continue the trend of referring to their artifacts by this term, the ruling of the UNESCO Convention of 1970 would force museums to practically deplete their entire collections. He then goes on to claim that the Parthenon Sculptures are the symbol of all artifacts that have not yet been repatriated. At the end of his argument, he uses extremely loaded words as he did in his first argument, claiming that "the preservation and enjoyment of the world's cultural heritage and the fate of the collections of the world's great museums are all in some measure at stake in a decision about the Marbles" (Merryman 1985: 1895). Claiming that the "fate" of the entire world's cultural heritage lies in the balance and depends on the outcome of this debate creates a sense of urgency in the reader and sparks a feeling of what one may even call dread. These words, like "human culture" and "common", persuade the reader to imagine that repatriation is a threat against them personally and that they should feel attacked by the Greeks and their argument for the return of the sculptures. Finally, within this last argument an important point that can be easily overlooked. Merryman states that if the demands of Third World nations are met, then "great Western museums" would be left nearly empty (Merryman

1985: 1895). This point makes it clear that Western museums are almost entirely dependent on the artifacts of non-Western countries. It begs the questions, are Western museums built to simply allow Western citizens to gawk and stare at foreign artifacts, objects of strange, exotic cultures that are so different from ours that they need to be studied? (Merryman 1985: 1895).

If this is the view of respected academics, who hold the power to influence everyday citizens, then how have they shaped the views of the people who visit museums, who do not have the background or knowledge to properly critique these arguments? Nick Trend, a writer for the British tabloid *The Telegraph*, makes his own attempt at an educated argument against repatriation. Within his article, he brings up two of the discourses that exist regarding this debate. First, he briefly claims that only in a perfect world should the Parthenon Sculptures be returned to Athens, because only in a perfect world would they be safe from “the risk of pollution and earthquakes” and all the marbles could be returned to the Parthenon itself (Trend 2018). However, the major argument of Trend’s article is that repatriation will be a loss for humanity in general, not a gain for the Greeks. He criticizes British politician Jeremy Corbyn, who argued that he, if elected Prime Minister, would be open to the possibility of repatriation. Trend arrogantly picks apart Corbyn’s statement, claiming that he does not know “how much thought [Corbyn] has given to the ramifications” (Trend 2018). Trend claims that if repatriation takes place, it would start a process of repatriation of all looted artifacts, leaving not just the British Museum, but all museums empty. He then uses statistics of average attendance the British and the Acropolis Museums see each year, pointing out that the British Museum sees over six million visitors each year while the Acropolis Museum only sees about one and a half million. He claims that the removal of the sculptures would take away the opportunity for these millions of people to experience the sculptures, and it would also remove the opportunity for them to be studied

along with artifacts from the rest of the world. However, he goes further in his argument than even Merryman did, arguing that “great museums”, of which only one (the Hermitage in Russia) is found outside of the classically defined Western world, are worlds themselves, and “extraordinary repositories of the high points of human achievement” (Trend 2018). He even goes so far as to say that the British Museum is more “important and influential” than the Parthenon itself. This argument is the epitome of the discourse surrounding the Parthenon Sculptures and repatriation in general. Museums are more important than the countries of origin, and even the buildings of origin. Western museums hold artifacts from varying cultures and time periods together, which allows for a more complete understanding of human history. After this extremely bold point, Trend goes on to explain in similar terms to Merryman why returning the Parthenon Sculptures to Greece would start a trend of repatriation of all artifacts taken from countries under Ottoman control, including Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt.

However, while this is the focal point of the article, it is by far overshadowed by his claim that museums deserve artifacts more than countries of origin. It also encapsulates the extremely arrogant tone of the article, which includes instances of Trend interjecting with his own questions and challenging the reader, acknowledging that what he is saying will be taken to be completely insane by his readers. “You are exaggerating, you might say” and “Let’s take this one step at a time” are only two of the remarks he points towards the reader, scolding them and treating them as inferior to himself by attempting to break down his argument and simplify it (Trend 2018). His sense of superiority makes the reader feel almost ashamed for believing that repatriation is even slightly beneficial, and it sets up the tone for his entire argument.

This tone of Trend’s article brings to light the inherent tone and argument of these discourses against repatriation. It is a sense of superiority over countries of origin, and in general,

over non-Western countries. Western museums are better suited to hold these precious artifacts, and the ability to give foreigners access to these precious artifacts over the descendants of the creators gets at a term defined by French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu, in his book *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, states that “the ethos of the dominated fraction of the dominant class is expressed; as [Kant] so well puts it, the ‘charming’, which reduced the ‘pure knowing subject’, ‘freed from subjectivity and its impure desires’ to a ‘willing subject, subject to every desire, every servitude’, exerts real violence on the beholder” (Bourdieu 1984: 487). In Bourdieu’s concept, known as symbolic violence, he explains how a dominant class oppresses a subordinate one into willing submission and believing in their own inferiority. He looks at how the subordinate group is persuaded into wanting to join the dominant group by defining everything other than the dominant culture as less than. This leaves them trapped between trying to abandon their identity or accepting the negative connotations that have been placed upon said identity (Bourdieu 1984: 94-95).

When looking at the discourses of the British Museum, Magoffin, Merryman, and Trend, the themes of Bourdieu’s symbolic violence begin to come through. These Western sources are arguing one central claim: that Britain is the more suitable home for the Parthenon Sculptures over Greece. Whether it is because Athens is too dangerous for the sculptures, Greece does not have the proper resources to care for them, or that repatriation would steal from the rest of humanity, it is clear that each one is inherently saying that Western museums are the proper home of non-Western treasures. Each argument is based on the idea that something is wrong with Greece and that Britain is superior in some way. After analyzing these sources and how they approach the issue of repatriation, I put forward the argument that Western museums and academics are attempting to incite symbolic violence against non-Western nations. Arguing that



museums will take better care of these precious artifacts and that it is for the good of humanity and everyone's knowledge of history, along with the persistent statements that some countries of origin, while not yet capable of ownership, will one day see the return of their artifacts, can create a sense of inferiority and an acceptance of this discourse. This sense of superiority versus inferiority can lead to the view of Third World nations by the Western world as something strange and out of place, a sense of "otherness". Western museums are perpetuating the age-old stereotype that the West is inherently better than the rest of the world and using these themes to hold onto the control of artifacts. The West is trying to keep non-Western nations from accessing their own history and displaying it in their own way. Instead, foreign history is portrayed through the perspective of the West and loses its original context and meaning.

This sense of superiority and "otherness" leads to a desire in some to own artifacts from these "strange" and foreign countries, whether it be to satiate a thirst for historical knowledge or even bragging rights. However, while it is easy to understand why museums acquire artifacts, for many it is still difficult to imagine why average people would want to spend hundreds, even thousands of dollars to own an ancient artifact. An answer many come from an online market place, known as the Artemis Gallery, that sells artifacts to anyone who can afford it. On their website, under the "How to Buy" section, they call the collection of artifacts a "rewarding hobby and passion" and that the artifacts have been legally acquired from museums and other reputable sources. They claim that because they have handled thousands of artifacts, they have the ability and authority to determine what is real and what is fake, and that if there is any doubt, they refer to experts and scientists to test the authenticity of the piece (Artemis Gallery). The website uses words such as "easy", "timely", and "folks" to appeal to a more general audience who would be more willing to trust a website who claims to guarantee authenticity. They do not know that the

artifacts they are purchasing have been properly verified, they are looking for an easy process to purchase perhaps even a small artifact they find appealing. The laid-back, everyday language that is used creates an interest in this population and can start to create a demand in a new demographic that in the end adds to the desire to continue the antiquities trade. With promises that their company “takes the hassle out of bidding/buying online”, Artemis Gallery becomes to the average online shopper something akin to websites like eBay and Amazon. They even refer to the artifacts at one point as “products”, contributing to the casual atmosphere that draws people in (Artemis Gallery). Now it’s not just museums who can perpetuate this system of symbolic violence; anyone with the money and interest can be an unknowing participant as well. These artifacts become prized possessions for men and women who see them as products from a far-off, strange land. These foreign countries are simply providers who support the hobbies of rich, Western citizens. However, the effect the small number of people who could afford to use the Artemis Gallery has is nothing compared to that of the massive institutions that draw millions of visitors day in and day out.

For many, it is difficult to imagine museums holding any negative opinion of foreign nations. It is even more difficult to imagine that museums have negative effects on the countries from which their artifacts come. They are staples of Western society and culture. American schoolchildren stare in awe at the gold and precious objects in front of them on field trips and beg their parents for money to buy souvenirs from the gift shop. The Roman mosaics and Chinese statues inspire awe, but the most popular and commanding artifacts in any museum are the Egyptian mummies, which are also some of the most prominent examples of the aforementioned idea of “Orientalism” that leads to symbolic violence. For centuries, we have been fascinated by these humans preserved for eternity. However, why are we so fascinated by

these precious glimpses into the past? What is it about the Egyptian mummies in particular that draw us in and keep us wondering even after the trip has ended? Mummies have been brought to England since the early eighteenth century, and the United States in the early nineteenth century, as explained by S. J. Wolfe. These first specimens were not complete mummies, only a head, hand and arm along with an animal mummy, (Wolfe 2009: 7). When the mummified head was brought to Philadelphia in 1821, it was kept safe from the usual fate of mummified remains: burning, (Wolfe 2009: 11). In 1823, a full mummy was brought to the United States for the first time, and it was put on display in New England, becoming an immediate tourist attraction and drawing in over five hundred people in the first two days. It was called by one newspaper, the *New England Galaxy*, “one of the most interesting curiosities ever exhibited here,” (Wolfe 2009: 21). Another mummy, purchased in 1826, was eventually stolen from a museum in New York, inciting a trial in which the defendants, who were medical students trying to prove the mummy’s authenticity, claimed that because it was a human body, no one could own it and therefore it had not been stolen. However, the jury ruled in favor of the plaintiff, citing that even though it was the remains of a human, it was still property, comparing it to an ordinary anatomical specimen,” (Wolf 2009: 59). This very first example of the handling of Egyptian mummies in Western countries reveals some important facts. First, the use of the word “curiosity” in the article by the *New England Galaxy* reflects the later idea that the mummy was a product of something or someone “other”. It was something people could not understand. The word curiosity can be interpreted to mean something that is of that “other”, that non-Western cultures need to be studied and analyzed. It is something that is so bizarre it draws in hundreds of tourists to gawk and gaze at its wonder and strangeness. This begins to bring up the idea of Orientalism, and this fascination with the East is not just a product of its differences, but of its

strangeness. The sense of superiority Americans held was fueled by the distance they felt from the mummies, and the complete opposition to Western culture it represented. Second, this first mummy in America begins the debate of mummies as property and who can claim them as their own. The museum came out on top in this first trial, setting the stage for the idea that not only were human bodies property, but that Western collectors and corporations could claim them as their own. Egypt was not involved in this trial, but it sets the tone for the issues to come with the debate over who can claim ownership of mummies and other artifacts. However, the most important outcome of not just the trial, but the inclusion of mummies in museum collections is a direct connection to Bourdieu's symbolic violence. The superiority the visitors and museums felt reveals that as men and women walked past these ancient humans, the museums gained something much greater than revenue. They gained power over Egypt and other countries of origin, as they could now claim artifacts, even human remains, as their own property. Artifacts were no longer connected to their countries of origin by anything other than name. This trial began a long history of mummies coming to the United States and becoming some of the most important artifacts for museums, as their "strangeness" and "Orientalism" had incredible drawing power with the public. One of the most important men who provided the supply for this demand was Italian Giovanni Belzoni, a failed hydraulic engineer who turned to exploring Egyptian tombs. He discovered countless royal tombs and mummies during a time when excavation included using explosives to enter pyramids (Wolfe 2009: 61).

By the 1850s, America had been overcome with mummy fever, and museums were no longer the only place you could see these faces of the past. Traveling circuses became a prime spot to view these strange specimens. However, mummies in circuses are hard to track and identify because they did not have the same impact on the viewers and very little is known about

their origins. The most famous name that comes up when trying to research mummies who met this fate is P.T. Barnum. As early as 1851, mummies from museum catalogs were showing up as part of his “Museum of Wonders”. In 1870, he wrote to his friend Moses Kimball, asking if his or someone else’s museum had an Egyptian mummy he could purchase. Mummies were becoming the butt of jokes and finding a home in state fairs next to fortune tellers (Wolfe 2009: 82-87). This transition from awe-inspiring marvels of human history to laughing stocks and images of a strange, exotic, land of “otherness” reveals the shifting American opinions of non-Western countries, and the developing stereotype that these countries are inferior to the West.

Modern examples of this turn-of-the-century perspective on Egyptian material culture can be found in entertainment, including a film released in 1999. In *The Mummy*, set in the 1920s, two groups of British and American archaeologists and treasure hunters accidentally bring to life the mummy of a cursed vizier to an Egyptian pharaoh while searching for a lost city and treasure. In one scene early in the film, the Americans mock the British protagonists, who uncovered the mummy while they found part of the treasure. The Americans ask if the protagonists know for how much the jars will sell on the market and point out that their counterparts could dry out the mummy and sell it for firewood (Sommers 1999). This scene is a subtle but poignant look at the Western perspectives on Egyptian artifacts and culture in general. Expensive objects are dollar signs and human remains are useless garbage. While the movie is a work of fiction and first and foremost entertainment, this scene provides an important reminder that artifacts were not the respected treasures we find behind glass display cases today. They were oddities, created by some long-forgotten people and sought-after only for their aesthetic value.

When we go to museums, we rarely, if ever, wonder how the statues and objects got to their resting places in the quiet, dimly lit galleries. We contemplate their meaning and how

ancient societies could have crafted such magnificent artifacts. The journey of these artifacts from discovery to display has been largely ignored, and the shadows that loom over the world of the antiquities market hide dark secrets. For centuries, artifacts have been stripped from the ground and even standing structures in order to fill the galleries and storage rooms of museums. From the legal acquisition of the Parthenon Sculptures by Lord Elgin to the illegal work of poor citizens of Third World countries supplying coins and other objects for the long journey to an ignorant museum or collector, these windows into the past have become property not of their countries of origin, but of the West. Plea after plea by Third World nations have either gone unheard or shut down on the grounds that artifacts belong in the West, whether it is for their own protection or for the knowledge of humanity as a whole. This refusal sets the stage for an eventual acceptance by countries of origin of their own inferiority when compared to the West and develops into symbolic violence. However, as long as nations like Greece and academics like Dr. Tom Flynn continue to go against the status quo and demand the repatriation of artifacts, the attempt at symbolic violence will remain just that: an attempt.

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