

Who Owns the Past? Archaeology, Museums, and Politics in the 21st Century

Meliora Seminar Proposal

Elizabeth Colantoni

Department of Religion and Classics

In January 2017, the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria used explosives to destroy significant portions of the ancient Roman theater at the archaeological site of Palmyra. Under cover of night, workers for the city of New Orleans removed a statue of Confederate leader Jefferson Davis from public property in that city in May 2017. In January 2018, the home and office of Manhattan billionaire Michael H. Steinhardt were raided by local authorities to seize archaeological objects that, according to the New York county district attorney, had been looted from Italy and Greece. The Greek government then requested the repatriation of many of the objects in question.

As these incidents show, historical objects, monuments, and sites are not relegated to the past. They are the building blocks of modern identities and politics, and, as such, they are at the center of current events on a daily basis. The Meliora seminar I propose to teach, “Who Owns the Past? Archaeology, Museums, and Politics in the 21st Century,” will examine current issues concerning the ownership, protection, and presentation of cultural heritage, including particularly archaeological and historical objects, monuments, and sites. In the course, we will ask: Who decides what cultural heritage is significant? Who should determine how archaeological and historical sites are presented to the public? Should private individuals be allowed to purchase objects of historical or archaeological significance? Should museums work to provide collections that are encyclopedic in scope, with material from all over the world? What moral and ethical responsibilities do museums have? Who owns cultural objects taken in the context of warfare? What constitutes a valid claim for the repatriation of an object?

The course will begin with introductory information about archaeology, museum studies, and cultural heritage law. The class will then focus on specific case studies, which teams of students will present to the class, with class discussion to follow. Students will also be expected to write short position papers about each case study. Each student will then write a final research paper in which he or she makes larger arguments about a specific theme pertaining to the ownership, protection, and presentation of cultural heritage. Another idea that I am considering, perhaps in conjunction with or even instead of a final research paper, is a public symposium in which the students present their work, although I recognize the practical difficulties of holding a public event at the end of the semester. In terms of academic skills, the course will emphasize writing, oral presentation, and discussion and debate skills.

Topics covered include:

- Archaeological methods and ethics
- Museum studies and the ethics of collecting
- Cultural heritage and U.S. and international law

- Native communities and cultural heritage in the context of colonialism
- Presentation of slavery at American historical sites
- Nationalism and cultural heritage
- Warfare and cultural heritage
- Repatriation of archaeological objects
- Sustainable tourism and site conservation
- Authenticity and the role of modern technology in cultural heritage

A sampling of possible specific case studies:

- Kennewick Man (prehistoric human remains from what is now Washington State that scientists long asserted were not related to contemporary Native American populations; scientists wanted to study the remains, while Native American groups fought to have them respectfully reburied)
- Confederate statues in New Orleans
- The Whitney Plantation in Wallace, Louisiana (antebellum plantation site where the public presentation is focused on enslaved people rather than the plantation's owners)
- "Priam's Treasure" (gold artifacts taken from the site of ancient Troy, in what is now Turkey, to Germany under questionable circumstance by Heinrich Schliemann in the 1870s; the objects disappeared during World War II and resurfaced in Moscow in the 1990s, and they remain a point of contention between Turkey, Germany, and Russia)
- The destruction of cultural heritage by ISIS in Iraq and Syria
- The Buddhas of Bamiyan (monumental 5th-century statues in Afghanistan destroyed by the Taliban)
- The Elgin marbles (ancient Greek sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens that now reside in the British Museum in London; they are arguably the single largest point of conflict between the Greek and British governments today)
- The Euphronios krater (an ancient Greek vase that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York purchased from a private art dealer for over \$1 million in 1972; following legal action, in 2008 the Metropolitan Museum voluntarily returned the vase to Italy, whence it had been illegally excavated from an ancient Etruscan tomb)
- Pompeii (an archaeological site that is being "loved to death" by the massive number of tourists that visit the site on a daily basis)

The course will also take advantage of a number of special resources available here at the university and in the Rochester community such as:

- The Memorial Art Gallery (as a home base for the portions of the course directly related to museum studies; I have already been in contact with Andrew Cappetta, the Assistant Curator of Academic Programs at the MAG)
- The Rochester Museum and Science Center (for discussion of the history, ethics, and legal issues concerning the display of Native American archaeological and ethnological

artifacts, including in particular in connection with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act; I have not, however, made contact yet with RMSC about this possibility)

- The Digital Scholarship Lab and the 3-D printer in Rettner Hall (practical use of technological tools as a part of class discussions about authenticity and the extent to which models and replicas can serve as substitutes for authentic artifacts and buildings)
- The James Conlon Memorial Lecture (an endowed lecture, organized by the Department of Religion and Classics every fall, on the topic of the protection of cultural heritage; students would attend the lecture and meet with the speaker as a part of the course)

The course will touch on themes and issues pertinent to Archaeology, Classics, History, Art History, Anthropology, Museum Studies, Law and Public Policy, and International Relations. The course will be listed as a Classics course (my home subject), but I regularly teach courses that are cross-listed with History and/or Art History, and I hope that the Departments of History and of Art and Art History will both be open to cross-listing this course as well.

In terms of budget, I do not have specific numbers this early in the process, but I believe that it would be useful to have the full \$6000 available, especially if the funding is supposed to support multiple iterations of the course. Possible expenses include:

- Books
- A trip to the Whitney Plantation as a part of the course preparation (I know that, unfortunately, I do not have the time to make such a trip this year, but perhaps could before the second time the class is offered, in fall 2019)
- Transportation costs (e.g. for a class visit to the Rochester Museum and Science Center or other local museums)
- 3-D printing fees
- Catering costs (e.g. for lunch with the Conlon lecturer or for a public symposium of student work)