

## Restitution of Art

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Channing Memorial Church  
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You must know at the very start—I love museums. My father was an artist and his father before him. I grew-up going to museums with my parents from a young age. So much so that museums are part of our family lore. When I was just three-months-old, my father carried me in a backpack and a museum guard innocently came over to give me a little coochie-coo. Only to everyone’s surprise, little baby Amy let out a blood-curdling scream, sending my father running from the otherwise peaceful gallery. There are other family stories, too. Like the time that my Va-Va, that is my maternal grandmother went with us. She rushed over to cover my two-year-old eyes in front of a large painting of a naked woman. I know that my parents never felt a need to shield me because I remember clearly on an elementary school field trip to the Museum of Fine Arts explaining to my friends who were giggling in front of a nude sculpture, “Don’t you know, that’s art!”

No matter what is happening in my personal life, when I roam through a gallery I feel a sense of reverence and a heightened awareness. Similar to attending a worship service, I feel in tune with a larger truth than the particulars of my individual existence. There is a timeless spiritual experience in direct encounter with art. Whether it is an African mask, Japanese calligraphy, Impressionist painting, photograph or abstract sculpture, I gain new insights into what it means to be human. My appreciation for the complexities of this world is enriched.

So, it was with great anticipation that Peter and I went to the British Museum on our trip to London, three years ago. I looked forward to seeing the incredible treasures housed there including the Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles.

I remember John Keats famous poem, *On Seeing the Elgin Marbles for the First Time*. Keats recounts how standing in front of the 2,500-year-old frieze he had an overwhelming sense of his own mortality. The final stanza of the poem reads:

*So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,  
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude  
Wasting of old Time -with a billowy main,  
A sun, a shadow of a magnitude.*

Keats held the belief, popular at the time and still alive today, that ancient Greek art is the embodiment of universal virtue. The final line of another Keats’ poem captures this sentiment: *Beauty is truth, truth beauty*.

However beautiful and impressive, I did not have an epiphany in front of the marble frieze depicting an Athenian procession originally from the Parthenon. What most captivated my attention and had Peter and I buzzing with excitement was the Enlightenment Gallery. By “Enlightenment,” I am not referring to the Buddhist

attainment of Nirvana. The Enlightenment Gallery is a tribute to “the age of reason and learning that flourished across Europe and America from about 1680-1820.”<sup>i</sup> The Gallery is housed in the former library of King George III—picture lots of rich wood, the walls lined with shelves behind glass doors.

On these shelves are an amazing diverse collection of objects from manuscripts to fossils, religious icons to instruments of trade, tools to decipher ancient script to a small mermaid. That’s right, you heard me, a mermaid, with a sort of human upper body and a scaly tail! It is no wonder that these once private collections now housed together were known as “Cabinets of Curiosities”. In the case of the mermaid, it was a forgery, a creation of an inventive taxidermist, preserving and putting together a small monkey and a fish.

What was the reason behind these eclectic collections? During the Enlightenment “many people believed that the lack of social moral progress stemmed from ignorance about the world, its natural phenomena, and human history.”<sup>ii</sup> Instead of relying on the Bible as the only purveyor of truth, during the great age of discovery, as it was known, people were encouraged to have a direct encounter with the natural world. Through first hand observation and clear reasoning, each person would be able to gain knowledge about the world which in turn would lead to social progress. Sir Isaac Newton and other thinkers were professing the scientific method as a new approach to knowledge. This is one of the reasons that collecting became a popular past-time in the eighteenth century. The “Cabinet of Curiosities” could show the entire world in miniature, displaying the wonders of God, and “inspiring viewers to speculate on the mystery of nature with human ingenuity at its center”.

The belief that human beings can gain wisdom and advance society through the collection and study of objects is key to understanding the philosophy of the Universal Museum. What is a Universal Museum? Before defining it, let me name some of them: The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Art Institute of Chicago; The Louvre; Prado Museum; State Museums of Berlin. There are many others in the United States and Europe. Museums that like the British Museum hold diverse collections representing cultures from all continents of the globe. Whose mission is to be, in their own words, “agents in the development of culture and, whose mission is to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation”<sup>iii</sup>.

The reason that I am offering this sermon is not to offer you a lesson in Art History. There is a larger moral issue that deserves our attention. You may have noticed the two quotes for Reflection in your order of service. The first is from Neil MacGregor, the current Director of the British Museum:

*“All great works of art are surely the common inheritance of humanity... This is a truth that is surely more important to proclaim now than ever before. In a world increasingly fractured by ethnic and religious identities, it is essential that there are places where the great creations of all civilizations can be seen together, and where the visitor can focus on what unites rather than what divides us.”<sup>iv</sup>*

The second is a proverb from the Omaha tribe of Nebraska: “*Stolen food never satisfies hunger.*” Although Museum directors may claim that the treasures on display offer citizens of the world the opportunity to appreciate our common humanity, the fact that some of these items were stolen, spoils of war, and secured by unethical means, disparage the very cultures that they claim to affirm.

The countries of origin and descendants from which they were taken are now demanding Restitution. **Restitution**—now there is a religious concept! What does it mean? Here is a definition: the act of restoring anything to its rightful owner, or of making good, or of giving an equivalent for any loss, damage, or injury.

The Manchester Museum returning Aboriginal skulls to tribal elders is a clear illustration of Restitution.<sup>v</sup> These human remains were treated as “artifacts” for scientific investigation since colonial times. While Enlightenment values suggest that knowledge is gained through such study, the Aboriginals, the indigenous Australian people believe that this cruel act was not only theft but tormented the spirits of the deceased. Now, after heated negotiations, the remains have been returned to their homeland with respect and reverence. Instead of torment, the spirits have been set free on their eternal journey.

Human remains certainly seem like the most clear-cut example of objects that deserve greater reverence than to be preserved for public viewing. But then what about all those Mummies? From a young age, I’ve loved visiting the ancient Egyptian collection at the MFA. I remember the tremendous discovery of King Tut! The archaeologists were overjoyed to uncover such a complete collection with very little having been looted by grave robbers.

Wait a minute, who should own antiquities such as these? What is the overriding principle? Is it simply Finders Keepers? Or as some argue, should all treasures be returned to their original context. Should the beautiful bust of Queen Nefertiti return to her native Egypt instead of residing in Berlin? Should all fragments of the Parthenon marbles return to Greece? What about the African art taken during colonial times?

There is a significant Restitution movement returning artwork taken during the Third Reich to Holocaust survivors or their nearest descendants.

The Italian government has launched “an international campaign to recover items it considers crucial to its cultural heritage.”<sup>vi</sup> The Getty Museum in Los Angeles has reached an agreement to return forty items in its prized collection back to Italy, including a statue of the Goddess Aphrodite from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Negotiations were deadlocked until the Italians threatened never to loan anything to the Getty again. Now that an agreement has been reached, each party will enjoy an ongoing exchange of artwork and antiquities.

We are in the midst of a significant shift in worldview. The Enlightenment values that claimed that truth is a matter of empirical evidence are being challenged. Like in the eighteenth century when Westerners were awakening to direct encounter with the natural

world instead of truth being confined to the pages of the Bible, this is a time of global awakening and growing appreciation of our interdependence.

True Enlightenment is compassion. I love the concept of a Universal Museum, one where we can learn to truly appreciate the diverse cultures of the world and variety of artistic expression. However, it is time for Americans and Europeans (especially those countries that have historically had great wealth and power), to recognize that the only cabinet of curiosities large enough to house the wonders of the world is the earth herself. In order to move toward the goal of liberation from ignorance and progress toward a good life for all, instead of amassing and hoarding material goods, communal values and relationships must take precedence. Instead of a collection of material wealth, a shift to the creation of relationships based on mutual respect.

Our faith as Unitarian Universalists encourages each one of us to engage in a search for truth and meaning. While roaming the halls of a museum, purchasing items for our homes, experiencing wonders from around the world and close to home, instead of being collectors, let us re-examine our ideas and values. Keats writes “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”. The greater truth is Love and compassion. I close with the words of Alice Walker

While love is unfashionable  
let us live unfashionably.  
Seeing the world  
a complex ball  
in small hands.  
Love our blackest garment.  
Let us be poor  
in all but truth, and courage  
handed down  
by the old spirits.

#### Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> Guide to the British Museum

<sup>ii</sup> Notes taken from Enlightenment Gallery Exhibit

<sup>iii</sup> *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*

<sup>iv</sup> *View from the Universal Museum*, James Cuno, “Imperialism, Art, and Restitution Conference”, 3/26/04

<sup>v</sup> “Manchester Museum returns Aboriginal remains to Australia”, Terri Judd, *The Independent*, 6/30/03

<sup>vi</sup> “Getty Museum Strikes Deal to Surrender Antiquities”, Laura Sydell, National Public Radio, 8/1/07