The Role of Artist-Made Reproductions in Restitution Cases: How Museums Can Benefit from the Return of Original Objects to Source Communities

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Keywords Repatriation; Artist-Made Reproductions; Restitution; Museums

Abstract The relationship between reproductions and museums has been a long and tumultuous one. As Western notions about the acceptability of reproducibility have shifted and morphed, so too has the reproduction’s place in museums. This paper will examine the history of reproductions in Western museums and our contemporary obsession with original objects. This paper will situate reproductions into the debate around the restitution, repatriation and return of objects to source communities. In doing so, this paper argues that museums should consider, on a case by case, the repatriation of objects to source communities and the replacement of the original in the museum’s collection with a high-quality reproduction made by artists from the source community. This paper does not focus on other means of reproduction like 3-D printing that have become popular in museums. This article uses an example of a repatriation case - The Ghost Dance Shirt, formerly at the Kelvingrove Museum - where the original object was returned to the source community and replaced by a high quality, artist-made reproduction in the museum. This paper discusses the benefits of this process and the outcome. Finally, this article provides suggestions for how museums might recontextualize these contested objects and bring the visitor along with them during the complicated journey of return.

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This article was published on June 17, 2020 at www.themuseumscholar.org

“We must not insist on the sacrality of the original”
- Christian Greco, Director of Egyptian Museum, Turin, Italy

Introduction The relationship between reproductions and museums has been a long and tumultuous one. As Western notions about the acceptability of reproducibility have shifted and morphed, so too has the reproduction’s place in museums. This paper will examine the history of reproductions in Western museums and our contemporary obsession with original objects.
This paper argues that museums should consider, on a case by case, the return of objects to source communities and the replacement of the original in the museum’s collection with a high-quality reproduction made by artists from the source community. Artist-made reproductions in museums should be accompanied by transparent and frank accounts of the decision to return the original objects, as well as counternarratives of the object as written or dictated by source communities. This paper will detail an example of a case where the original object was returned to the source community and replaced by a high quality, artist-made reproduction in the museum. The benefits of this process and outcome will be discussed. Finally, suggestions will be provided for how museums might recontextualize these contested objects and bring the visitor along with them during the complicated journey of return. This paper will not delve into other means of reproduction that a museum could undertake to replace originals, such as 3-D printing, but, instead, focuses exclusively on artist-made reproductions where the artist is a member of the original source community.

History and Current State of Reproductions

The West’s acceptance of reproductions has ebbed and flowed throughout history. Plato espoused that copies were “deteriorated or defective originals” and he attempted to “reorient humans away from the everyday world of mimetic appearance towards a space of originals, ideas, and the Good.” In a world where making copies was laborious and arduous, originality was much easier to insist upon.

As humans learned the skills to make reproductions more sustainable and mechanized, they became more in vogue. The invention of the printing press, the casting of sculptures, the lithograph, the camera, the Internet; all of these were technologies that thrust reproductions into the hands and homes of people. Our relationship with reproductions has become more constant but, perhaps, more fraught, or, at least, in terms of museums. Casts of sculptures were once used abundantly and without judgment. At one point, museums were so enamored with casts, that in 1876, a delegation was arranged from European museums for a “cast exchange.” The Convention for Promoting Universal Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefit of Museums of All Countries was born from this meeting and, though this seems very dated now, perhaps a sliver of this enthusiasm could be resurrected within museums of today.

What caused this shift in museums’ comfort with reproductions? Like with many things in museums, opinion changed because of fear. Museums also fear returning objects to their sources because they believe they will be left with nothing - the “floodgates argument” – so the irony here is not lost. Museums fear copies and reproductions but they also fear the very thing that could save them from their fear of losing everything. Marcus Boon writes in his chapter in the book, Museums as Cultures of Copies: The Crafting of Artefacts and Authenticity, that copying fell out of fashion as Western society began to place more importance on the sanctity of original intellectual property. With the advent of the 1710 Statute of Anne in Great Britain, otherwise known as the Copyright Act, which is regarded as the birth of modern copyright law, copying was radically curtailed by law. Yet, at this time in history, copying was never easier.

With the birth of practical photography in 1839, the schism between copies and originals deepened. By the 1930s, leading philosophers and academics were articulating this divide.
In 1935, Walter Benjamin wrote his seminal text, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which is widely cited and clung to in art history and in museums. In it, Benjamin argues that the aura of a work of art – the intangible, inherent quality only found in an original – is lost when it is reproduced by mechanical means. An aura cannot be reproduced. According to Benjamin, it uniquely exists in time and space along with the original work of art. This is the element of Benjamin’s argument that museums cling to. The aura is rarefied, sanctified. Therefore, the original work of art is king. Accordingly, a reproduction cannot possibly have the weight and gravitas that an original has. If we follow Benjamin’s logic, original works of art have auras, just like all original things do. But, is an aura a less important thing for a museum to worry about than a moral obligation to society? This question will be returned to this later in this paper.

The other aspect of Benjamin’s argument that museums seem to forget is that Benjamin wrote that the more an object was reproduced, the more its aura was diluted and distorted. And, here’s the part museums gloss over: as a Marxist, he believed this was, potentially, a good thing. He believed that the further one moved from the original aura of a work of art, the more one could ask political questions of that object. In regards to the topics raised in this paper, how might Walter Benjamin weigh in on the very political topic of repatriation and reproductions?

As can be seen, Benjamin’s words can be weaponized to support either side of the argument for or against reproductions. Brenna writes about Benjamin’s work:

> Either it is used to emphasize aura as the essential property of the museum object, or it is used to hail the way that reproductions free the object – and the museum visitor – from the burden of history and tradition, leaving the objects open to reinterpretation and appropriation by new groups through practices of reproduction.

Regardless, “reproductions” remains a “dirty word” in contemporary museum culture even though, as Washington Post journalist, Menachem Wecker, writes, many visitors would be shocked to learn that museums use copies all the time in their exhibits. Wecker toured all of the Smithsonian museums and two of the Smithsonian affiliates in Washington D.C., scouring labels to discern if what he was looking at was the original or a reproduction. He found an inordinate amount of reproductions that were misleadingly labeled to make the public think they were looking at the original. This is consistent with current statistics that suggest that over 50% of art objects are fake. Famously, Thomas Hoving, the former Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shared that he believed some 40% of the works that the Met was considering during his tenure were fakes or forgeries.

Some museum directors are calling for the museum world to be more open about accepting reproductions. At a museum directors’ conference at the Vatican in 2018, the head of Turin’s Egyptian Museum, Christian Greco, said to his fellow museum directors, “We must not insist on the sacrality of the original.” Maxwell Anderson, former director of such influential museums as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Dallas Museum of Art, has written a call to arms, asking his colleagues, “Should we
relinquish our insistence on privileging original works of art?” In his *The Art Newspaper* article, Anderson writes:

*Museums face growing demands to decolonize collections. Patrimony claims have been re-energized among a new generation of civic and cultural leaders and audiences... Now that at least one world leader [Emmanuel Macron, the President of France] has proposed sending examples of contested cultural heritage back to their source, and one influential museum director [Christian Greco] has urged us for the sake of the climate to relinquish a time-honored insistence on privileging the original, the rules we have lived by since at least 1753 [the dawn of museums as we know them today] are in play as never before.*

The Maxwell Andersons and Christian Grecos seem to be in the minority amongst their fellow museum directors in their liberal views about repatriations. Why is the cult of the original so strong in Western culture? The following section will discuss the power the original has in the visual arts.

**The Original and the Reproduction: A Divide**

Wecker, in his quest to see how many copies he could find amongst the Smithsonian collections, noted that sculpture is often cast posthumously. Our most prized sculptures in the West are, very often, made well after the artist’s death. The artist’s hand never touches it. Yet, we don’t seem to mind this form of a copy. Similarly, casts and replicas are par for the course in science museums where dinosaur bones are easily substituted with reproductions. Most science museum visitors don’t seem to bat an eye about this exchange.

Wecker questions whether most people notice that an object is a copy when at a museum. As he cites, most museumgoers spend somewhere between three and seventeen seconds looking at a work of art. This statistic is inclusive of reading the label. With such a short glance, does it really matter to the non-expert viewer if the object isn’t entirely original?

Latour and Lowe write about how different forms of art are dependent upon copies as a means of distribution. They point to the performing arts, to literature, and to music. Each of these relies on an original but on an infinite variety of reproductions and, in some cases, variations. “We have no difficulty raising questions about the quality of the entire trajectory when dealing with performing arts, such as dance, music and theatre.” As an example of the schism, the authors focus on a play, *King Lear*, where the audience delights in reinterpretations of the original text. New actors, new stagings, new locations for the play invigorate it. We may glean some new information from the play in a restaging of it that we might not have been able to understand from a faithful reproduction of Shakespeare’s text. “Why is it so difficult to say the same thing and use the same type of judgment for a painting or a sculpture or a building?” ask Latour and Lowe.

Noah Charney writes,
Visitors expect a reverberant experience when confronting an original... There is also an element of celebrity-spotting in play. When I see a work of art that I recognize from the textbooks but have never viewed in person, I get an endorphin rush of recognition. Imagine the disappointment if a celebrity-spotter thinks she’s spied David Beckham, only to realize it’s just a lookalike.27

The cult of the original still has a stranglehold on Western culture. Is this something that can be lessened or, better yet, redirected toward feeling that same “endorphin rush” when encountering a reproduction that has a powerful story of exchange and respect behind it?

**Examples of Reproductions in Repatriations**

There are few examples of museums returning objects to source communities wherein the museum replaces the original with a reproduction, specifically with a source artist-created reproduction. This section will gesture to an example of this collaboration, *The Ghost Dance Shirt*, formerly of the Kelvingrove Museum, and apply this example to a contemporary opportunity, *Hoa Hakananai’a*, currently at the British Museum.

Lou-ann Ika’wega Neel, a repatriation specialist at the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, has suggested indigenous objects in museums be returned to the tribe from where they were removed. Furthermore, she thinks that indigenous artists from these communities should create faithful replicas of the original to take the place of the restituted object in the museum. “These replicas could remain with museums along with much more information, so they can continue to serve as educational tools for people of all cultures. Visitors know that we are not a dead or dying culture. We are still here.”28

Neel’s suggestion was enacted many years earlier, in the 1990s in Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Museum. The Kelvingrove was in possession of a Lakota Ghost Shirt, which had been wrongfully taken from a Lakota corpse following The Battle at Wounded Knee.29 The Wounded Knee Association was made aware of the existence of *The Ghost Dance Shirt* in the Kelvingrove’s collection in the mid-1990s. Led by Marcella le Beau, a Lakota tribe member and the secretary of the Wounded Knee Association (WKA), the WKA asked for the return of *The Ghost Dance Shirt*.30 The museum, believing the shirt had been acquired in good faith, entered into conversation with the WKA. Through mediated discussions and after Glasgow city residents supported the return of *The Ghost Dance Shirt*, it was returned to the Lakota in 1998.31

What is remarkable about this story isn’t the repatriation of *The Ghost Dance Shirt*. These repatriations happen, if not frequently enough. What is noteworthy about this case are three things: 1) the Glasgow public was consulted about whether they supported the return of *The Ghost Dance Shirt* and Glasgowians voted for its return, 2) Marcella Le Beau, who led the WKA in their repatriation claim, made a faithful reproduction of the shirt and gave it to the Kelvingrove where it remains, and 3) the museum displayed the reproduction of the shirt, along with a narrative of the repatriation story. The faithfully reproduced Ghost Dance Shirt that is currently on display at the Kelvingrove has been described by the House of Commons Culture, Media, and Sport Committee (CMSC) to be “in no doubt...a better, more educational
and more interesting museum display than that with had featured the original shirt.” As Curtis writes:

In Aberdeen, the exhibition Going Home: Museums and Reparation in 2003 also displayed the replica shirt, alongside the story of the headdress, and a discussion of some of the issues behind other requests to museums. Comments by visitors on a board in the exhibition were almost entirely favorable, such as, “all of humanity is connected to each other,” and “so glad to see this as a discussion – I knew very little about procedures and cases of repatriation.” It would seem that exhibiting the absence of an object can have a powerful impact, no less than that achieved by displaying it.

Not only has the Kelvingrove gained a richer, more nuanced, transparent, and moving exhibition of the replicated Ghost Dance Shirt, the relationship with the Lakota tribe has blossomed. Bailie Elizabeth Cameron of the Glasgow City Council said, “We have ended up forging a place in the history of the Lakota, and the Lakota have become part of the history of Glasgow museums.” Instead of displaying a static object from a faraway culture, the Kelvingrove is now part of a global, dynamic relationship. What they have lost is the original object but what they have gained is far more worthwhile of a museum in the 21st century.

Likewise, the Lakota have a relationship with Scotland in a way that they didn’t have before. In regards to another repatriation case in Scotland, Curtis writes, “…the keeper of the headdress [from the University of Aberdeen’s collection] repatriated from Aberdeen bought a kilt jacket to wear when dancing the headdress as a mark of its sojourn in Scotland.” In an increasingly globalized world, museums should celebrate the intersections between cultures that can be developed through repatriation.

Counternarratives or counter-stories give voice to historically silenced groups by making space for members of these groups to tell their own stories without interference or mediation. Acuff and Evans write in Multiculturalism in Art Museums Today:

Counternarratives are tellings of the world that synthesize notions of truth from multiple historical, sociological, personal, anecdotal, and familial sources. They question what “truth” is by rejecting the status quo and building a more relevant, accurate portrayal of what reality is and can be.

The Kelvingrove displayed the museum’s narrative of the return of The Ghost Dance Shirt, which is important and necessary, but other museums have taken this a step further by highlighting counternarratives from the source community and infusing these stories into exhibitions. Counternarratives are stories that come wholly from the marginalized group’s perspective, not from the group in power, in this case, museums. At the Miami University Art Museum in Oxford, Ohio, the museum worked with members of the Myaamia tribe to create the exhibition, myaamiaki iši meetohseeniwicki, which translates to “How the Miami People Lived.” The museum collaborated with representatives of the Myaamia tribe on curatorial decisions, exhibition design, and education. One result of this partnership were didactic
labels written by the curatorial team in a traditional way and labels for the same objects written by the Myaamia tribe. The labels were color-coded so that the museum’s voice was separated from the Myaamia voice. The same distinctions were made with the audioguide so it was clear who was speaking: the museum or the tribe.

For example, one vitrine in the exhibition held peace medals that United States government officials would have given to a Myaami representative at the signing of a peace treaty. The museum’s label read:

> Peace medals became an important component of treaty negotiations. United States peace medals were first issued under the administration of George Washington (1732-1799). They contain a full-length portrait of the statesman, shown offering a peace pipe to the native chief.\(^{37}\)

Located next to the museum’s label was the Myaami label, which read:

> Treaties were often viewed as “the law of the land.” They are crafted as binding agreements between nations and are intended to foster peaceful coexistence. But, as Myaamia, our experience with treaties gives us a different perspective on these negotiations.\(^{38}\)

The inclusion of the Myaamia voice gives space for a people-focused counternarrative to develop and run up against the museum’s object-centered scholarship. Similarly, historic homes and plantations in the United States’ South that once glossed over the enslaved people who labored in these spaces, in favor of telling visitors a sanitized story focused on the beautiful furnishings and genteel owners, are making space for counternarratives to emerge. These institutions are beginning to grapple with the fact that by not sharing the stories of the enslaved people who were integral to the functioning of these places, they are erasing these voices and perpetuating a myth that the wealth and power of the owners was not tied to slavery. On a recent tour of the Owens-Thomas House in Savannah, Georgia, Lacey Owens, a tour guide, describes the fine furnishings and luxury of the Owens’ dining room. But, she also:

> ...explains, in detail, that the presentation of wealth wasn’t possible without the enslaved people on the property. The meals served on that elaborate table were prepared by a black butler named Peter; the crown molding was dusted multiple times a day; the carpet was taken apart at least twice weekly, beaten and spot-cleaned with boiling water by the enslaved people in the house, including the children.\(^{39}\)

Allowing marginalized peoples to tell their own stories in museums is critical. In cases of repatriation, source communities should tell their own stories of loss and what it means for them to be reunited with the objects that were taken from them. Hearing these stories will be a powerful reminder for why museums should support the return of objects to source communities. Furthermore, source communities can tell the stories of creating an artist-made reproduction, the one that remains at the museum after the return of the original. This story of the replacement object could be an opportunity for museum visitors to learn more
about the culture where the object originated and the traditional methods of creating this object. Through counternarratives, there are countless opportunities for learning and growing to occur in the museum itself, in the source community, and in the visitor, who benefits from seeing the many layers of collaboration between museum and community.

Within the above stories, there is much to celebrate and emulate. Right now, Easter Island inhabitants have asked the British Museum for the return of a sacred object, the figure of *Hoa Hakananai’a*, which was taken from the islands in 1868 by the crew of the HMS Topaze and given to Queen Victoria, who later donated the figures to the British Museum where they have remained for the last 150 years. The figures are spiritual connections to ancestors. In conversations with the British Museum, the Easter Island delegation has proposed to replace the statue with a reproduction, made by an Easter island artist, Benedicto Tuki. Tuki is an Easter Island sculptor and he has volunteered to make a replica of *Hoa Hakananai’a* for free.

The British Museum should take a page out of the example set by the return of *The Ghost Dance Shirt* to the Lakota from the Kelvingrove in Glasgow. If the British Museum were to survey visitors, like the Kelvingrove did with Glasgow residents, the majority would support the return of *Hoa Hakananai’a* to Easter Island. Furthermore, the British Museum should see this as an opportunity to forge a lasting relationship with the people of Easter Island. The museum should support the artist-made creation of Tuki’s replica and exhibit it in the museum, along with new interpretive materials that focus on counternarratives, the reasons for and process of repatriation, and how *Hoa Hakananai’a* has been welcomed back to his family in Easter Island.

There are scores of other opportunities to experiment with artist-made reproductions and repatriation. In 2018, a report that French President Emmanuel Macron commissioned suggested that French collections repatriate their African objects to African communities if these communities request their return. The report’s authors suggested that French museums could replace the originals with reproductions. This could be an ideal opportunity to experiment with having reproductions of the original objects made by artists from the African communities where the original was removed. Artists could be invited to the museums to study the original, plan for the creation of the reproduction, and even create the replica on site. Not only could the artist bring knowledge and expertise and voice that could be lacking at the museum, the museum could involve visitors in the exchange by creating interactive programming with workshops that teach the techniques that the artist would use to create a reproduction. This would be an opportunity for a significant exchange where both parties are made culturally richer.

**Conclusions**

Steven Conn, a historian and author of the book *Do Museum Still Need Objects?*, has asked the question that his book is titled after: do museums really still need objects? Yes, museums do still need objects. It is, quintessentially, what makes a museum a museum. But, do museums need ALL of their objects? No. Do museums need to hold so tightly to every single one of their objects? No. Do museums need experiences as much as objects? We continue to move in this direction. Can carefully, thoughtfully made artist-created
reproductions of restituted objects create new experiences for visitors that can compete with the experience of seeing the original object? Absolutely.

Wecker asks if “viewing copies somehow lessens the experience of going to a museum?” Wecker asks if “viewing copies somehow lessens the experience of going to a museum?”46 When contextualized properly and when so much is at stake, artist-made reproductions of items returned to source communities will enhance the experience of going to a museum. And, when artists from the source community create new objects, the new object is endowed with an aura that is different than the original, certainly, but important.47

Latour and Lowe write that when a visual work of art is copied, “…a sense of fakery, counterfeiting or betrayal, has been introduced into the discussion in a way that would seem absurd for a piece of performance art...It seems almost impossible to say that a facsimile...is not about falsification but it is a stage in the verification of [the artist’s] achievement, a part of its ongoing biography.” In this vein, it is key to the success of museums that when replacing originals with artist-made reproductions, that the narrative of the return becomes a part of the object’s story. This story should be detailed in interpretive materials that surround the reproduced object. Counternarratives from the source community should also be clearly represented in the museum. Videos of how the artist-made reproduction was created and of the original object being returned to its home could be key parts of the exhibition. Lubar, a former curator at the Smithsonian’s American History Museum asks, “Is it about authenticity of artifact, or authenticity of story?” The authenticity of the story is an overlooked element of repatriation that should be highlighted in museums. As Hein points out, museums are increasingly prizing experience over object.50 Stories of repatriation should be valued for authenticity as much as objects should be valued for it.

After the opening of the Acropolis Museum in Athens in 2009, The Guardian surveyed United Kingdom residents about whether they thought the Elgin Marbles should remain at the British Museum or be returned to Greece. An overwhelming 94.8% of respondents voted for the return of the Elgin Marbles. 5.2% voted for the Marbles to remain in England. This is a staggering difference and signifies something bigger that more museums should be paying attention to. Museum visitors want to have an authentic experience but more than this, a moral experience that they can feel good about. Museums need to let visitors decide how they feel about reproductions rather than decide how to feel for them. We do not know better than they do about how they will feel about museums that have replaced originals with artist-made reproductions so as to return the originals to their source. Fouseki has argued that the reunification discourse is academically-led and does not portray wider public opinion.”52 If museums conducted focus groups, they would probably find that museum visitors feel more strongly about justice and return, than about the authenticity of an object.

Charney writes about museum-going, “we want an authentic encounter as opposed to the experience of gazing at reproductions in books.” But, who is “we?” And, who gets to speak for the museum visitor in the case of artist-made reproductions and repatriations? Museum visitors could be as inspired or, even, more inspired by an authentic encounter with an artist-made reproduction than a rote encounter with an original if the original has been returned for moral and ethical reasons. But, we should let visitors speak for themselves. We need more surveys and studies that ask visitors the very important questions of what they
support: a displaced original whose loss is being mourned by the community where it was created, or an artist-made reproduction that highlights the story of return, reunion, and collaboration?

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