


Fall 12-16-2018

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Recommended Citation

Mercado, Caroline, "Lords from the Desert" (2018). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/272

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Lords from the Desert

How the heist of Ancient American art is presented inside an aseptic plexiglass case to please your cosmopolitan taste.

By Caroline Mercado

A classic favorite from the American Museum of Natural History AMNH has been updated this fall. There was much more inside the Old New York diorama than the caption said. The 1660 diplomatic encounter between the Dutch and a delegation of the Lenape displayed what people in 1939 believed true about the colonization of the island of Manhattan. They imagined look-alike half naked Indians willingly giving away their goods, submissive women in the background, no native technological advances to honor. With a windmill and a row of Dutch style houses framing the scene, the European elements take over the landscape to demonstrate who is in charge. New Netherland's leader Peter Stuyvesant embodied power and his realistic mannequin withstands scrutiny. Protected by a guard who passively displays a fire gun, Stuyvesant just had to extend his hand to be served by the locals. Without labels pointing out to the clichés and the disguised violence of the scene, the spectator missed the clash of what the encounter really meant for the natives. The diorama eulogized the blatant narrative that legitimated the European invasion of ancient land. It stood unquestioned for almost 80 years.

The new Old New York labels are the first step of a larger project campaigned by “Decolonize this Place” to bring context to museum displays. The organization is known for leading the calls on renaming Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day in New York, and for the petition to remove the statue of Theodore Roosevelt that adorns the main entrance of the AMNH. Their demonstrations, which include splashing red painting onto statues pedestals, raise awareness on the controversy of praising historical figures that massacred natives, enslaved African descendants, or both. But their pursuit goes

further, on an open letter to the AMNH, the organization demanded that the museum pays back their revenues for exhibiting indigenous cultures of the world by “undertake meaningful and radical steps to decolonize its exhibits and holdings.” Today, the Stuyvesant diorama has new captions about the agricultural development behind the tobacco leaves that the Lenape leader Oratamin hands to the settler. The labels also point to what is not seen: the absence of the Indigenous canoes that once navigated narrow river basins, the fur coats and regalia in which Lenape diplomats dressed up for special occasions, the crucial role that their women played in society. The scene remained unaltered, but the captions glued on the diorama’s glass changed its meaning forever. Honest labeling in museum displays is just the beginning of the quest to reclaim the narratives of the past.

Museum Studies professor Jane Anderson from New York University specializes in the intersection of intellectual property and cultural heritage. Since museums and archives continue to replicate the colonial contexts that formed their collections, she has developed a system of tags called TK Labels to include the missing information of indigenous perspectives about their heritage. “TK” stands for “traditional knowledge,” the narrative given by living descendants to the purpose and history of an ancient artifact. Anderson's project webpage Local Contexts provides a free guide for using these labels, and they are already being implemented by communities like the Musqueam and the Penobscot for their library collections and digital museums. But who can provide the traditional knowledge of artifacts from cultures that disappeared centuries ago? “I would always be asking as who says that they don’t exist anymore,” says Anderson.

Anderson is skeptical about questioning if today’s indigenous people, like the Mesoamerican and Andean communities, have any relation to archeological sites. Even the use of the word “ancient” reinforces the idea of a time artificially distant. But actually, the first Aztecs and Incas, to give an example, were contemporaries to Medieval Europeans, which means that they are as relevant to present day as Richard the Lionheart or Johann Gutenberg. Anderson advocates for a new structural framework

that puts present day indigenous people in a lineal way with the ruins. “I think those communities are their descendants,” she says. Some Europeans can trace their genealogy to Medieval towns, why not apply the same logic to Indigenous Americans and their archeological surroundings?

The Walters Art Museum, opened its doors in Baltimore in 1934 as the Walters Art Gallery. Founded by the Atlantic Coast Line heir Henry Walters, the museum has a solid sample collection of Ancient, Asian, Islamic, Medieval, and European art from the Renaissance to the 19th-century in building that was dubbed as “a little Met” by its director for nineteen years until 2013, Gary Vikan. In March 2018, The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore launched its first Ancient America temporal exhibit in five years, and is currently running its second until October 2019. On each exhibition, it presented around 20 pieces of a collection that exceeds the 500 pieces, which are not on public display and can only be seen on their webpage. The institution has a solid collection of pre-Columbian art that started in 1911 when founder William T. Walters purchased 100 gold artifacts from Panama. The collection grew exponentially in 2011 when 300 new pieces were incorporate from New Mexico collector John Bourne, heir of the Singer sewing machines company. His donation of pre-Columbian art included Mayan figurines that he back took with him when doing an India Jones style archaeological expedition in Chiapas in 1946.

Later in his life, the collector became the client of the respectable authenticator and controversial Los Angeles art dealer Benjamin Johnson. In 1988, the Peruvian government tried to recover 89 pieces from Johnson possession, pointing out a pair of gold ears pools and a gold rattle from the Moche culture, alleging that they share style with findings of the recently excavated site of Sipán. But it lost the case in a California court in 1992 because without paper trail, it was almost impossible to prove that the pieces originated from Peru. Johnson’s defense, on the other hand, Stanford University law professor John Henry Merryman stated a case against cultural nationalism and the

greater value of humanity's cultural heritage. The pieces should remain in American territory and from here they belong to the world.

Johnson's family continued making business with his art possessions. The ear spools and other Moche goods were acquired by Bourne after the case was closed. But over the years, the splendid collection lost status. This wasn't the 1960s anymore and the rules for importing Peruvian Moche art became strict after this case. The Bourne collection didn't make good donation material to museums due to its murky provenance. Bourne tried to give them to the Museum of New Mexico in 2008, but its director politely declined. Big museums weren't interested either. In times when public institutions have subscribed to strict protocols for new acquisitions and are encouraged to come up with novel curatorial methods to break the cycle of colonialists practices, the Walters Art Museum, through its director Vikan, decided to deal with a very hot potato by accepting the donation. In his memoir "Sacred and Stolen," he justifies the acceptance of this donation because he genuinely believes that by not doing so the collection would have been "dispersed in auctions and disappear into dozens of private homes and apartments across the globe." On the current exhibit "Transformation: Art of the Americas" the ear spools claimed in the 1988 court case are finally on public display in Baltimore.

In September 1993, the remains of a newly discovered Ancient American ruler from the Moche culture set off for a two-year tour in the United States. Since the Peruvian government had no budget to hold the "Royal Tombs of Sipán" exhibit in a local museum, the artifacts of the New World's richest unlooted tomb, as it was called by *National Geographic* in October 1988 when the magazine ran the exclusive story of its discovery, had to rotate between international museums, including those in Germany and Japan, to raise funds and build its own place back home. When it was time for the American Museum of Natural History to open the exhibit in June 1994, its lavishness was compared by *The New York Times* to Tutankhamun's tomb similar blockbuster visit

from 1978. It was a total spectacle for museum goers —the first untouched ancient site found in the continent— every piece was laid out in the exact place where it was originally found.

The “Royal Tombs of Sipán” exhibit created a replica of archeologists Walter Alva and Luis Chero’s 1987 discovery of three intact burial chambers at Huaca Rajada, a Moche ceremonial center in the town of Sipán. The Moche culture (first century-eight century) dominated the deserts of north coastal Peru leaving behind splendid ceramics, mural paintings and metal artifacts inside hundreds of mud pyramids that the sea breeze and occasional rain eroded over the centuries. In a 2008 documentary film produced by Spanish filmmaker José Manuel Novoa about the Sipán archaeological project, a bandit looter, Teófilo Villanueva, recalls the night he found one of the minor chambers of the site before Alva’s arrival. Along with two partners, the trio used an unsophisticated hook to plunder artifacts like ceramics and vases. After many attempts to obtain something more valuable for the international market than clay pieces, they hugged each other in excitement when the first golden artifact was caught. Then, an atavistic fear ensued. “I had to drink three shots of rum to gather courage and continue,” he says. “The owner was lying there.”

The main chamber belonged to the Lord of Sipán, placed on the center; his high ranking military official, to his right. Three young women, none of them reaching to the age of 20, were buried at his left, top and bottom. The remains of two llamas and a child also accompanied the lord to his afterlife. A prisoner was placed on the top corner of the chamber, feet cut so he can’t escape his sentinel duty. A dog laid over the roof that covered the burial scene. The discovery catapulted Alva into an archeo-celebrity and changed the course of international policies to control the smuggling of ancient Peruvian art.

American museums have already had impressive collections of Moche artifacts before Alva’s discovery. The 1960s was the golden decade for amassing pre-Columbian collections as the prestige of wealthy collectors allocating their bequests to universities

and museums increased the value to this art, which was called “primitive” back then. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, has a very impressive collection of Moche art, sourced mostly from the infamously looted *huaca* of Loma Negra. This collection was given to the museum in 1979 by Nelson Rockefeller who became interested in pre-Columbian art after spending five years in Venezuela, working for his family oil business.

Before this exhibit, the common route of ancient Peruvian artifacts from their original sites to museum galleries in the First World involved an exchange that had very little to do with scholarship. Local peasants, like Villanueva, dug the ground to extract ceramics, or *huacos*, and other valuable pieces whenever they needed extra cash. If they did so as a full time job, they would be called *huaqueros*. The pieces were later acquired by urban middlemen with connections to a person with social capital, someone who wouldn't raise suspicion when passing through Jorge Chavez International Airport customs control with camouflaged gold figurines in the luggage. On the other end of the continent, the pieces were passed down to the dealer, who then offered them to a client base of wealthy art collectors. Once sold, the best case scenario for these objects is that instead of keeping them to himself, the collector would donate them to a university or museum. At this point, scholars can finally begin to study them, or more specifically, “to extract information” from them, since they offer no archaeological data behind. The collectors' acquisition is called “good faith purchase” under the law because he supposedly has no clue that the objects were actually stolen. His name is attached to these museum objects and becomes their only traceable provenance, the proof that no wrongdoing was involved.

In a 1990 symposium held in Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard University's estate for its Pre-Columbian and Byzantine collection, the foremost Mayanist scholar Michael D. Coe analyzed this market as “an economic system, divided into realms of production, distribution, and consumption.” He states that there are dangers in making retrospective judgements on activities that took place in the past, in times where people didn't blink an eye with the ethics of the ancient art business. Nevertheless, he came up with a

nickname for the person at each stage of the trade: runners, residents, couriers and dealers. He used the word *huaquero* for the first person in the scheme, the term was already part of Latin American popular culture.

The most splendid Moche ear spools outside of Peru are those kept in the Jan Mitchell Treasury gallery at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. They are so appreciated that they have become a favorite from the museum collection, they were selected for the “Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in Ancient America” spring 2018 exhibit and are currently on display in “Jewelry: The Body Transformed,” an exhibit that with an unorthodox curatorial proposal for ancient art: they are regarded as decorative objects created to adorn the human body. They can also be found as decorative pins in the museum souvenir store, with their winged runner in miniature. Mitchell, a Manhattan restaurateur turned into collector after marrying an art dealer, has his name engraved on top of the entrance of this gallery, where visitors enter a room with pieces from different cultures and centuries with the common unity of just being made of gold. Colima pendants, Sicán masks, Moche ear-spools, Inca figurines, all of them made of gold, sitting in a white surface inside a plexiglass box, led lighting pointing at them, reflecting an oneiric yellow gold shade on the visitors body. The ransom demanded by Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro to release Inca Atahualpa in 1532 was to stock his prison room floor to ceiling with gold and silver artifacts. If there’s a place that gives a glimpse to what that room might have looked like, then it is this space at the Met museum.

The archaeologist in a criminology department Donna Yates from the University of Glasgow wrote about the symbiotic relationship between museums and antiquities collectors. Since the value of ancient pieces has increased, museums cannot afford to buy them anymore so they have to “court” a limited pool of collectors with special guides, dinners and the promise of engraving their names to posterity. “A collector gets something important from donating to a museum: the symbolic manifestation of your

success on society and convert it into social capital,” says Yates. And of course, there is the financial incentive of these donations. The value of an artifact is set during house auctions. The last time a private Ancient American collection went to public auction was in Sotheby’s Paris in 2013 and it belonged to Barcelona family Barbier-Mueller. A Moche golden head ornament was sold for \$24 thousand, a copper feline head rose to almost \$400 thousand. If these pieces end in public museums, donors receive a tax deduction on a price that starts from those numbers. This is all done in secrecy, institutions have no obligation to reveal the identities of their donors or what experts estimated to be the value of a piece. When the Moche ear spools arrived to the United States, John Bourne said he paid for them \$40 thousand to Benjamin Johnson in 1987.

How come stolen antiquities gain value in time without acknowledging its murky provenance? “We just haven’t made the connection,” says Yates. “If you compare it to something like elephant ivory. In the past ivory was considered an elite good, having ivory things was a symbol of cultural capital. There has been a very effective media campaign against that, and at this point if somebody has an ivory thing in their house, they imagine dead elephants.” There has not been this kind of campaign against looted art, much less to the manipulation schemes of antiquities tax deduction.

I was going to see the Moche ear spools at The Walters Art Museum. The “Transformation: Art of the Americas” exhibit was located in the old manuscripts room in the third floor of the museum. I was received by Ellen Hobbler, the Associate Curator of Art of the Americas, and Gabriella Souza, Communications Manager. Because of their company, instead of taking the visitors’ route through the galleries, which included passing the European Baroque Art Collection, I went upstairs through the administrative offices. It was not a glamorous entrance, but it made me instantly realize the variation of temperature and humidity that take place in museums. Once you enter a gallery, the air is different.

The room was much smaller compared to the size of other galleries in the museum. The walls were green and there was a map showing the geographic location of all the pieces in exhibit. It was a partial map of the American continent, it started in Mexico and was cut at the southern tip of Peru. Cultures were represented inside countries, Aztec, Olmec, Xochipala, Maya, Diquís, Guanacaste, Chiriquí, Calima, La Tolita, Moche, Wari, Nazca. “For me it was really important to get outside of the box and go beyond Aztec, Maya, Inca,” says Hobbler. If the exhibit had just one Inca object, then the map would have to be much larger and include Chile and Argentina. The theme the curator picked for this exhibit was to bring together different objects from different cultures under the meaning “transformation,” which happened in the past through objects that allowed the divine to permeate the body, or to become an animal, or to enter a different state of consciousness.

Hobbler has a PhD in Art History and Archaeology from the University of Columbia. Before coming to the Walters in February 2017, she was a professor at Cornell College, where she was included in the list of “Professor Who Inspire” by website nerdscholar.com. She has spent many years in Mexico and is fluent in Spanish. One of the projects she developed while she was there was the digital recreation of Zapotec tombs located in the archaeological site of Monte Albán, build ca. 500 BCE in modern day Oaxaca. This place full of bushes and trees has the same green hue that the gallery of Ancient American art in the Walters museum. This color was her choice for the exhibit. But what about the Moche and the Nazca who flourished in the desert? “They honored fertility. They created springs along different rivers and had ingenious ways to store water, the *puquios*,” she said, using the Quechua language word for water wells.

There is a term coined by archaeologists to explain what they do when they have a piece without provenance. It is called “educated guessing,” which means that they use all the resources they have: archives, past exhibits, pictures of private collections, to build a background of certain art or style. While Hobbler was walking me through the exhibit she would explained to me the efforts the museum made to have a better understanding of each pieces. She pointed to an Aztec maize deity, 21 inches tall, made

of volcanic stone. It had a cavity in its chest that was used to place a jade stone as a religious ritual. Hobbler believed that the cavity was originally painted in blue because its purpose was to attract water. She sent the statue to the laboratory, no blue was found. “We invested so much in this piece,” she laughed.

Here is a full disclosure of me as a journalist who is curious about this topics. I am Peruvian and I may not know much about archaeology, but I can tell the difference between artifacts from the different cultures of my country as a basic knowledge that we are all given at school and that I nurtured by visiting museums and ancient sites. When I entered the Ancient American exhibit room at the gallery, my eyes immediately scanned for the Peruvian ones. There were four. “And this is a Wari ceramic canteen,” said Hoobler. Wait a minute, the narrow tip, that face shape in the middle, even its hair cut, it looked like Nazca for me. How do you know that this is Wari and not Nazca? “Yeah, right? It does look kind of Nazca. You just have more of the god stuff when you get into the Wari culture,” she replied. That stuff was the shape of the pupils of the figure, half white and half black, the Wari god, with a staff on each hand. She later sent me the scanned pages of a catalog from the Cleveland Museum of Art, with a note: “Regarding our little ceramic Wari canteen, I had forgotten how similar the imagery on it is to scientifically excavated urns from Conchopata, which are definitely Wari. See attached few pages from the Wari catalogue. Sometimes it’s hard to remember all the research one has done, once some time has passed.”

It was time to see the Moche ear spools, the ones that were claimed by the Peruvian government 30 years ago and are now in this museum. Hoobler acknowledged that the past is complicated. Gary Vikam, the director who accepted Bourne’s donation, has a personal code of ethics, dubbed “Vikan’s Doctrine.” The director has previously accepted controversial pieces and this is not the only room in the gallery that display stolen art. Under Vikam’s perspective, when accepting a complicated donation one must follow some guidelines: perform due diligence, which means to research the provenance of the objects; upload photographs and description of the pieces to the

Objects Registry of the Association of Art Museum Directors; and then wait. “Everything has been up there for nine years and nobody has come to us,” said Hoobler.

When the late feminist archaeologist Joan M. Gero from the University of South Carolina reviewed the “Royal Tombs of Sipán” exhibit in New York, she pointed out the fascination that mainstream archaeology has with lords, generals, and important male figures in detriment of the study of the larger society that sustained such personalities. But even she could not resist to the fascination of the Moche regalia, she wrote: “the sheer volume of wealth associated with a single individual is breathtaking: not one set of ear spools but three, not one shell-bead pectoral but ten, not one metal back flap but two, 12 feather fans, four nose ornaments.” One of the ear spools she mentioned in the review is the one in display at the Sipán museum, finally built very near of the original place where the excavation took place. Over the years, that ear spool became a national icon. It is golden figurine the size of a palm dressed with turquoises, a club and a shield on each side, and he is accompanied by two generals, who display their own regalia. The main figure is so exquisite that it has its own little nose ornament and its own little ear spools in scale, complete with the gold and the inlaid stones.

When I stood in from of the ear spools at the Walters museum I was genuinely surprised by its small size. It depicted one warrior each, but not the Mets winged ones made of three different color stones, these were made of turquoise in a green stone inlay. That was it. They were half the size of the ones at Sipán, and they only hold one club and one shield made of the same stone in their bodies, no decoration, no face ornaments, even their tiny ear spools were plain. I was fooled by the Moche marketing of endless amount of gold and precious stones. It was clear that not everything belonged to high status people, maybe these spools were the biggest possession of a lower rank Moche official. I see myself in the mirror and I see an indigenous person, but I cannot tell if she is Moche, Nazca, Wari, Inca or even Asháninka, who still populate the Amazon forest. I have no provenance of my ancient ancestors, just like these beautiful small golden ear spools don't have theirs.