

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:  
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

# **Object Destinies: What Is a Better Future for Material Culture in Institutional Collections?**

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**Center for the Future  
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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

An academic foresight paper that reimagines the values and mission of collecting institutions as part of a future in which the ownership of collections of cultural objects is in the hands of the people who created them or their descendants.

## ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [\*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today\*](#).

I am an archaeologist with experience working with museum and private collections and I direct a program at the University of California, Los Angeles, called the Waystation Initiative. The Waystation facilitates voluntary returns and agreements for shared stewardship of international archaeological and ethnographic objects with nations and communities of origin.<sup>1</sup> The initiative launched in January of 2023 and comprises a suite of programs, including a certificate in Cultural Heritage Research, Stewardship, and Restitution for UCLA graduate students, a broad international stakeholder network, a workshop series, and the development of a standard for Shared Stewardship and Voluntary Return.

My focus and that of the Waystation is on anthropological and archaeological material—items that are often not intrinsically works of art—and this essay focuses on institutions with collections of those types of materials. At the moment, I am working in support of museums rather than for a museum—a distinction that makes my viewpoint informed, but external. For this reason, the content of this essay is a mixture of speculative fiction and opinion. Central themes include a consideration of how we think about the ownership of objects now and in the recent past and how that could change in the future.


In this essay I consider two imagined futures: one that reimagines the values and mission of collecting institutions as part of a future in which the ownership of collections of cultural objects is in the hands of the people who created them or their descendants. The other future postulates an (extreme) outcome where museums and other collecting institutions do not continue the current trajectory towards repatriation and more cooperative relationships with communities, but rather our efforts are reversed as part of a larger shift in the governing of the United States. I have decided to begin with the latter viewpoint because it demonstrates how far we have come towards recognizing and responding to the often violent history of colonialism attached to museums and collecting. Though we are making progress toward a more diverse and collaborative practice, cultural institutions must be ever-changing to respond to the needs of constituents and evolving professional and social ethics. The second part of this paper describes an idealized future for collecting institutions and describes some challenges to accomplishing it.

Throughout this essay I will employ terms that are widely used by institutions working towards similar goals as the Waystation Initiative. Since others may define and use these terms in slightly different ways, for the sake of clarity, I define them as the Waystation uses them:

- **Collecting institutions** are museums and other organizations, including universities (whether they have a museum or not), that have intentionally accumulated cultural objects for the purpose of research, display, and interpretation.

- **Cultural objects** are tangible cultural heritage, usually archaeological or ethnographic in origin. The Waystation will also use “orphaned cultural object” or “orphan”,<sup>2</sup> to describe items that lack a transactional history (provenance) showing that they were exported and acquired legally and ethically. This lack of documentation means these objects cannot be donated to most collecting institutions in the United States.
- **Decolonization**, often called the “decolonization of museum (or curatorial) practice,” includes efforts to openly acknowledge the colonial histories of collecting, reevaluate the legacies of founders/major donors whose wealth and collections were obtained through colonialism, diversify museum professions, retribute illegally and unethically obtained cultural material, include and incorporate Indigenous voices into interpretations and exhibits, engage with diaspora communities, and ensure that objects—especially sacred objects—are cared for in a culturally informed way.
- **Stewardship** is the act of caring for and preserving cultural objects. This includes establishing an ideal storage environment (controlling for temperature, humidity, pollutants, and pests), utilizing a collections management system, documenting with proper photography practices, undertaking condition reporting and conservation, and enforcing carefully considered access and handling limits. It also encompasses documentation, display, research, and interpretation. Culturally informed stewardship encompasses the community engagement needed to determine the most appropriate ways to document, display, and interpret. The rights of nations and communities to intellectual property are incorporated. Culturally informed stewardship may also include special environments and restrictions for sacred or otherwise culturally sensitive material as defined in consultation with the nation or community of origin.
- **Voluntary return** is the deliberate and proactive effort to reunite cultural objects with their nation or community of origin, regardless of whether those entities have requested it or US or international laws or conventions have mandated it. It is a process that includes developing respectful, reciprocal relationships with nations and communities that will be sustained beyond the act of returning objects. I may also use the word “restitution” in this essay to include the concepts of restoration and reparation that define it.

We are living in a historically volatile political environment. In considering a fictional, less progressive future for museums and other institutions that collect and curate cultural material, I saw a parallel with current reactionary movements against critical race theory (CRT). CRT is an academic framework created for graduate-level law students between the late 1970s and early 80s, which focuses on racism within institutions and systems (not on race or racists). Proponents of CRT see race as a social construct rather than a biological one (Bell 2023; Fortin 2021). The CRT discipline has examined “how policies and practices in K-12 education contribute to persistent racial inequalities in education, and advocates for ways to change them” (Sawchuk 2021), but again, it was not created




for K-12 teaching or teachers, but for law school students. Nonetheless, conservative groups have mounted a backlash claiming it is widespread in primary and secondary schools, and that it advocates racism against white people and teaches (white) children to hate or be ashamed of American history (among other things).

Bryan Brayboy adapted CRT to reflect the experiences of Indigenous peoples in his 2005 article “Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education.” Brayboy notes, “U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain” and that “Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of their identities” (2005:429). It isn’t much of a stretch to envision the same conservative pundits associating CRT with efforts to decolonize museum practice. Therefore, my imagined, dystopic future briefly summarizes our twenty-first-century progress towards decolonization by deconstructing it.

## 2030: THE RECOLONIZATION OF MUSEUM PRACTICE

**By 2030, the US is an authoritarian government (characterized, in part, by legal, educational, business, military, and other institutions legitimizing an oppressive system). Existing elections infrastructure and voting and election laws have been dismantled, ensuring the ongoing political control of the government in power. After dissolving the overt systems that protect the rights of underrepresented and underserved groups, the government begins to focus on less overt efforts. This includes the movement to decolonize museum collections and practices.**

**At first, just a few bilateral agreements under the Cultural Property Implementation Act are not renewed, then all are allowed to expire. With majorities loyal to the White House in both Congress and the Senate, the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) is the first act to be repealed, and the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony (STOP) Act soon follows. The National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts are permanently defunded, and all institutions receiving federal funds are prohibited from spending on diversity hiring, and from creating or perpetuating education, interpretation, and exhibition programs that overtly incorporate or refer to Indigenous and community knowledge or viewpoints. An increasingly conservative Smithsonian Board of Regents changes the institution’s guiding ethos and rewrites more progressive policies. These actions erode and discourage efforts at diversity and community engagement. Staff otherwise committed to progressive programs choose to resign or begin to employ subtle methods to preserve collaborative relationships,**




continue provenance research, and maintain accurate records and well-researched exhibitions.

National Park status is removed from large areas of land, many of them protecting Native American and historical sites, and cultural heritage preservation programs are deemphasized in favor of expanding recreational activities like fishing and hunting. Excavation of previously protected sites is encouraged, and that material is transported to museums and universities.

Years go by, education erodes, and job applicants are less informed of and dedicated to the goals of decolonization. As wealth in the United States further concentrates among a few powerful conservatives, the educated middle class shrinks and more museum trustees, donors, and board members come from the former group than the latter. In conservative states, governors revoke billions in arts funding to reduce and discourage BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other diversity-focused programming. As federal funding for museums and universities dwindles, many institutions close or revive outdated and often ethnocentric models to satisfy new funding requirements; private granting agencies expand opportunities but cannot sustain the majority of America's arts and culture programs. The progress established towards inclusion, collaboration, and reevaluation of collecting and interpretative practices made in the early twenty-first century are primarily sustained by private museums and universities in more liberal states.

Using early twentieth-century museums as a guide, natural history museums revive old dioramas portraying early interactions among white colonists and Native Americans. A statue of Theodore Roosevelt on his horse is repositioned in front of the American Museum of Natural History and many Civil-War-era monuments are replaced around the country. The Genesis flood narrative is commonly integrated into interpretive material for everything from dinosaurs to geological phenomena. The president announces the focus of the next World's Fair will be "Reindustrialization and Recolonization."

This dystopic vision of the future is exaggerated and implausible but nonetheless reflects real political actions, such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's recent veto of arts funding (see Brutus 2024; Martinez 2024) as well as repeated attempts over at least two decades to defund the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities (Fierberg 2023; Koch 2018). Changes in museums in a few states probably wouldn't impact efforts to shape a better future for museum practice and for the communities that museums serve, but I would argue that the current




trajectory towards more diverse, collaborative, and inclusive museum practices has been cumulative over the last century and is part of the progress of larger equal rights movements towards progressive and liberal objectives. Stopping this progress in some states may slow the overall momentum.

## 2030: SHARED STEWARDSHIP OF DECOLONIZED COLLECTIONS


In my imagined, ideal future, museums are the stewards of cultural objects, not the owners. This revision of the museum's identity follows the current trajectory of efforts towards decolonization. Many aspects of these standards are summarized in the January 2024 revision to NAGPRA regulations in the section on "Duty of Care."

In this idealized destiny for museums, the concept of stewarding cultural objects or sharing stewardship inherently involves an acknowledgement of rightful ownership. At the moment, the concept of ownership is rarely identified as a central issue in the discussion of museum practice (however, see AAM 2023). Nonetheless, it is essential to reinventing the relationships between Western collecting institutions and nations and communities of origin. In this imagined future, ownership of collections of cultural objects is in the hands of the people who created them or their descendants, and the interpretation and standards of care for those objects are based on traditional knowledge in collaboration with scientific information and scholarly research.

Some museums have already created policies that allow for shared stewardship. On April 29, 2022, for instance, the Smithsonian adopted a Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Policy (SSER). Generally, the SSER allows Smithsonian units to enter into shared stewardship agreements and "authorizes Smithsonian museums to return collections, in appropriate circumstances, based on ethical considerations" (St. Thomas 2022). There are twenty Smithsonian museums/units, many with their own version of the SSER policy. Of those that have published distinct policies, only the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) mentions changes to ownership. More often, shared stewardship is defined as a collaboration between communities and the museum on the care, storage, display, interpretation, documentation, intellectual property rights, and public access to cultural material (CFCH 2023:11).



The definition of shared stewardship in my ideal future incorporates those developed by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and others and includes a transfer and acknowledgement of ownership as an early step. Within a shared stewardship agreement, the parameters of meaningful collaborative engagement



are defined by the nation or community of origin, as are the responsibilities of the museum towards the objects and their permitted use and function within the museum. Through collaboration, the rightful owner and the museum create interpretive, educational, and exhibition plans, based on knowledge that the community feels it is appropriate to disseminate.


## RETHINKING OWNERSHIP AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO SHARED STEWARDSHIP

I once heard it said that for many people, museums are violent spaces where evidence of tragedy, intentional harm, and deliberate erasure is displayed and honored. Museums and other collecting institutions have historically been places where descendant communities are not only isolated from their cultural heritage but subjugated by the interpretations of “experts” from outside their communities.

Ownership is central to discussions of museum practice and consensus building with communities and nations of origin, but it is rarely highlighted as one of the fundamental issues. How can one group claim ownership of another’s heritage? Why is ownership so central to museums and other cultural institutions, and how can institutions change this aspect of their identity and their hierarchies of value?

NAGPRA repatriations have laid important groundwork in many museums—they have necessitated the rewriting of deaccessioning policies to allow for repatriations and required museum directors, administrators, financial officers, and board members to recognize the need to deaccession, engage with communities, and incorporate Indigenous voices into museum practice. As a result, we know that these changes and not repatriation are first steps to restituting cultural heritage.

The restitution of objects from collecting institutions to nations and communities of origin often raises the specter of empty museums and has elicited strong arguments in support of encyclopedic museums (Cuno 2011:31; Kennedy and Eakin 2006; Merryman 1985:1895). A museum’s collection is often its identity—is a museum still a museum if it does not have a permanent collection? There are institutions that rely exclusively on traveling exhibitions comprising only loaned material, but major museums seek to acquire and curate masterpieces. Several kinds of value are tied to objects in museum collections—artistic/aesthetic, cultural, educational, and monetary—and the status of a museum is tied to the myriad facets of value reflected in its collection, its exhibitions, and other programming.





“The concept of value is a social construct and is thus defined by the cultural context in which it is created” (Papadopolous and Urton 2012:1). Redefining museum values is one way of revising the identity of collecting institutions. (Though I have referred to encyclopedic museums, this discussion is still focused on institutions that primarily collect archaeological and ethnographic material, rather than fine art.) For museums to redefine themselves in a way that distances them from concepts of ownership, they must establish new metrics for success so that the value of the museum and its collection is understood to be primarily cultural and educational and not monetary. This redefinition is itself a sociocultural shift requiring everyone from donors, grantors, museum boards, museum leadership, curatorial professionals, and the general public to have a more nuanced understanding of the value(s) of cultural heritage.

At present, it is very difficult to separate objects that are considered works of art from notions of commercial value. This is not only because they were purchased and are insured for a monetary sum, but also because most people equate commercial value with specialness. Rarity also plays an important role in constructions of value; something that is unique is generally assigned more value than something that is common. Museums, by their very existence, create commercial value for works of art—artists represented in the collections of major museums can generally sell their work for more than they could if their works were not in museum collections and the same principle undoubtedly applies to other object types exhibited by museums.

This tendency to conflate financial and cultural value can pose significant challenges to redefining museum metrics. For instance, a colleague recently told me that the funding for her university museum is indirectly tied to the total (monetary) value of the collection. As repatriations proceed, it is likely that someone somewhere within the university system will notice and be concerned when both the total value and the number of objects in the collection begin to shrink. It will take work to convince all stakeholders that this is a positive trend for the institution.

This monetization of collections is something that is actively being addressed by museums (AAMG 2021). Professional ethics guidelines generally prohibit curators from authenticating and appraising works of art, on the grounds that these activities create risk and potential conflicts of interest for the museum (AAM 2009; CAA 2009). Guidelines for academics who work with archaeological material similarly discourage authenticating, evaluating, and even researching and publishing previously undocumented objects because these actions can increase the objects’ market value and thereby provide further incentive for the looting of sites and illegal trade (AJA 2020; ASOR 2019; SAA 2024). Through provisions like these, the field is making progress towards decoupling commercial from cultural value, but it is unrealistic to imagine



that the two can be completely disconnected. Museums will continue to purchase objects, which necessitates raising the funds to do so. Insurers will continue to require monetary values be assigned to items being insured. However, if the educational and cultural value of collections is understood to be their foundational and most important characteristic, perhaps discussing commercial value can become taboo; deemphasized to the point of irrelevance.

Without a doubt, the concept of transferring ownership of cultural objects will elicit the “empty museum” reaction we have seen in the past, and indeed, my model does present a drastic reimagining of the function and purpose of collecting institutions. Shared stewardship agreements, however, are intended to keep objects in institutional collections (also see Marlowe 2024). It’s likely that most objects governed by such an agreement will not be “masterpieces,” which are most often the objects that nations want returned, but items that more accurately represent the everyday life and materiality of a group or culture. Masterpieces might be borrowed for major exhibitions, as has become the practice for the Getty Museum and many others (Getty 2007; Muchnic 2009), and this greater dependence on loans will result in deeper collaboration with nations and communities of origin.

Many nations and communities may not chose to share stewardship, particularly not before a robust relationship exists between entities. However, many nations, including Mexico, Italy, Egypt, the UK, and Greece, struggle to manage and store metric tons of pot sherds, architectural and figurine fragments, and other common duplicative objects such as shabtis, clay lamps, and projectile points (Baxter 2023; Garcia 2024; Kersel 2015; Silberman 2015). When ownership is acknowledged and the appropriate governmental agency has recorded the objects for which stewardship will be shared, the nation of origin can effectively lighten its curatorial load and the stewarding museum can develop a positive, long-term relationship.

In reality, many collecting institutions are already moving in the direction of my imagined future, though the relationships needed to effect shared stewardship will take some time to develop. This model does not exclude exhibitions and collecting/collections, but rather redefines those goals as part of a greater objective of collaborative engagement. In this idealized destiny, museums acquire knowledge and community relationships, not objects; they are stewards at the request of nations and peoples.





## ENDNOTES

1. Elements of the Waystation Initiative were inspired by successful Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and Cal-NAGPRA programs like the one at UCLA, which is dedicated to repatriating objects already on campus. Because UCLA has a robust NAGPRA program, the Waystation Initiative does not seek to restitute Native American objects. The Waystation’s focus is global; it seeks to return archaeological and ethnographic objects to nations and communities of origin.
2. This word has a fraught history and has been employed to describe everything from objects in museums collections that lack acquisition data to fragments of once complete ceramic vessels or other antiquities. The term’s use has been comprehensively reviewed by David Gill (2008) and Leventhal & Daniels (2013). In 2022, a white paper compiled by UNIDROIT summarized certain aspects of that organization’s response to issues relating to private art collections. The white paper undertakes the task of defining an alternative to “orphan” and ultimately decides on “orphaned cultural object” for the time being, until the use of additional, more specific terms can be evaluated. The paper’s authors noted that “unprovenanced” was considered specific to the origin of an object while “orphan” was viewed as indicative of theft or illicit exportation.


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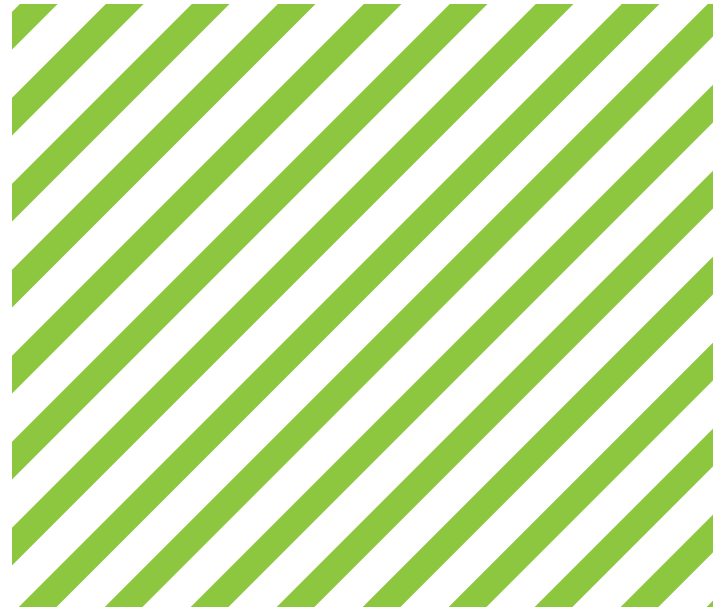
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