INTRODUCTION

I am looking at art and artifact repatriation because I want to find out the current status of the ownership/repatriation debate to better understand the relationship between museums and source countries so that we can find a diplomatic solution. I have found that the debate of ownership and repatriation has turned more in favor of the source countries in the last three decades. A major turning point was the 1970 UNESCO convention "on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export, and transfer or ownership of cultural property."* 

BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW

Illegal/illicit excavations of ancient sites have created a large collection of unrecorded artifacts of historical and cultural value. These items are looted in order to be sold, first through black market dealers and then through legitimate auction houses, ending up in the hands of museums and private collections all over the world. There are ethical statements and expectations, but few actual laws governing the sale of artifacts, even for those objects lacking a documented ownership history that are highly suspect of being looted. Many highly regarded museums and private collectors were (and are!) buying objects regardless of their legitimacy. This lead to countries with rich cultural history and a high amount of looting to demand repatriation and restitution of items that are suspected of being stolen.

QUESTION/RATIONALE

Can a world or encyclopedic museum, where countries and cultures share their artifacts with other countries and cultures in a scholarly manner, solve the dispute? In this way, more people will be able to experience the rich culture and heritage that belongs to the entire human race in a way that we can ensure its preservation and availability for future generations. It is important that we find a diplomatic solution, so that the flow of objects, ideas, history and culture between museums and countries can continue.

TERMS

UNESCO
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Art/Artifact Repatriation
The return of art or objects of cultural significance to their country of origin or original owners.

Restitution
The restoration of property or rights previously taken away.

Stolen
Documented as once in a known collection from which they were abstracted by theft (Renfrew, 2000)

Illicit
Clandestinely excavated and illegally exported antiquities (Renfrew, 2000)

METHODS/RESEARCH DESIGN

I am working on finding a diplomatic solution between museums and source countries. I plan to compare and contrast the acquisition and repatriation policies of both major and minor museums, along with private collections. At this point in my research, I have seen that many museums have changed their policies very much in the last 20 years. One thing that cannot be set off the changes was an exposure of the connection between curators at prominent museums and black market dealers in illicit antiquities. The scandals, which revealed detailed activities from prominent museums’ histories, such as the Getty, the MET and the Boston MFA, were tinder that helped to start a fire of new resolutions and policies in museums, other institutions, and countries all over the world.

SIGNIFICANCE

This topic is significant because the material remains of the past are important in the present. It will gauge the current standing of the debate, the main arguments from each side, the intended solutions that have already been put in place, and what more can be done to find common ground.

My main inquiries will be into the guidelines set by the UNESCO conventions, the acquisition and repatriation policies of museums, the cultural property ownership laws of countries, often referred to as source countries, from which artifacts have been taken and what more can be done in all areas that has not yet been done or what can be further expanded upon that has already been shown to be a successful tactic.

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Art and Artifact Repatriation

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University Honors Program

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