

Presentation as guest speaker at the American for Indian for Opportunity luncheon
“Art vs. Artifact”
August 23, 1992

On May 21, 1991, I purchased, with the intention of returning, two Hopi Kachinas and one Navajo Yeibichai at Sotheby’s auction of “Fine Indian Art.” On May 22, an article in the New York Times (headlined “Buyer Vows to Return Masks to Indians”) quoted me accurately: “There is a distinction between that which is sacred to a living culture—and ‘art.’ Sacred material should not, cannot be bought and sold.”

Response to my action and my statement was extraordinary. The requests and denial to remove “masks” from the auction block had already been well publicized and so the story was followed by the media and by the public. In the weeks that followed the auction the public expressed appreciation for this ethical action; people contacted me by phone and fax.

This was followed in rapid succession by phone calls from leaders of the First, Second, and Third Mesa in Hopi. My request to the Hopi leaders and representatives was that they be in unanimous agreement about the clan to whom the “masks” would be returned. After a week’s deliberation, it was determined that the two Kachinas, Ahola and Koyemsi, be returned to the Kachina Clan Matriarch, Suzie Youvella, of the First Mesa. And so that was accomplished in July 1991. On March 24, 1992, Koyemsi danced in ceremony, the first time in a very long while.

It was during this period that I began to think about starting a repatriation foundation. After many discussions with leaders from around the country, the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation (AIRORF) was born.

The foundation is the only non-federally funded, not-for-profit organization committed to the return of sacred material. It is a significant move away from impersonal government legislation to private intercultural cooperation. Importantly, ethical issues that surround these sales need to be addressed by collectors, dealers, galleries, and museums.

AIRORF’s mission is to educate non-Indian adults and children, as permissible by Indian custom, as education provides the seed for responsible action and integrity.

The foundation highlights worldviews and seeks to answer questions that arise in the non-Indian world. Questions such as:

- What is sacred?
- How should repatriation of sensitive material be handled?
- What is ownership?
- Who owns what?
- What can be bought and sold?

American Indians are not adequately recognized and appropriately respected as the experts of their own culture. Acknowledging who knows what, about what, is the basic tenet of repatriation.

The founding trustees, Reuben Snake, Walter Echohawk, Esq., Marty Sullivan, Rick Hill, Lucinda Ziesing, and Carol Master, have determined that, as we are the only organization focusing on the repatriation of ritual material from the private sector, we will be a conduit for donors to return sensitive material to their nation of origin in accordance with ceremonial requests; as NAGPRA is new and is navigating in uncharted territory, we are going to assist in the introduction of representatives from nations and tribes to museum personnel and visa versa.

A Provenance Committee will determine the nation/tribe of origin of a particular object, suggest representatives to contact to determine an object's provenance, and decide whether or not an object would be requested for return, and if so by whom.

Examples of items consigned for follow. All were labeled as "Important American Indian Art":

55 clay pots (many mimbres)

84 baskets

169 textiles (rugs, blankets)

131 personal items (jewelry, belts, bags)

61 items of clothing (buckskin shirts, leggings, and so forth)

4 masks

5 headdresses

8 Kachinas dolls

4 other dolls and figures

2 tepees
10 mosaic plaques
1 bow
7 daggers and knives
3 rifle scabbards
4 pipes
8 clubs and cans
3 shields
10 boxes and eating bowls
1 mirror
1 mirror frame
8 utensils
3 bone hooks
4 harpoons
1 wood chest
4 rattles
11 carved ivory toys
4 totem poles
2 paddles
2 buckets
5 hide drawings
2 rare books on the American Indian

It is not merely art versus artifact that needs to be addressed, but the use of the word “art” by auction houses and dealers and the incorporation of these objects into the art market, since many are spoils of war, spiritual items, or cultural patrimony. Including such items in the art-as-commodity paradigm increases their value in the art marketplace. It is also a morbid cultural denial of our country’s history—and a denial of the First Peoples of this continent, who inhabit, use, and rely on their creations for both physical and spiritual sustenance.