

**Paper presented in conjunction with “Changing Hands: Art without Reservation,”
Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, NM
“The Ethic of Collecting”
July 8, 2003**

Thank you to the Museum of Fine Arts and Director Marsha Bol for providing the opportunity for this evening’s talk and discussion.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to sponsor this important exhibition, “Changing Hands: Art without Reservation,” here in Santa Fe. It is wonderful to have contemporary Native American art in a museum of fine art. This exhibition contains fine examples of, and thus provides clarity on, the distinction between art that is appropriate for exhibition and sale, and those items that were made for ritual and ceremonial purposes and are needed by living cultures to continue their spiritual and cultural life.

I am using this exhibition of contemporary Indian art as a point of departure to discuss my thoughts about collecting. Collections are the mainstay of museums, the pride of collectors; sales of art are the *raison d’être* of art dealers and art auctions.

Tonight I am focusing not on the *ethics* of collecting but on an exploration of the *ethic* of collecting. Another time I might discuss the *ethics* of collecting, or collecting *ethically*, or *ethical* collecting, but not tonight. Tonight is about what collections yield, about why people and institutions collect objects. And I would like to pose a question: Are there other collectables more valuable than objects?

So, I invite you to journey with me and look at collecting as an ethic, as in a system of standards—a system that I propose is culturally based rather than a universal or instinctive activity. (Collecting, of course, is the latter if we are talking about squirrels gathering acorns or people picking cranberries.)

In part, collecting as a verb is defined as “bringing together,” especially in accordance with a principle of selection or for an informative or profitable end. This definition of collecting is, of course, within a conceptual framework, which I call a worldview. A worldview is a set of

basic beliefs, values, or attitudes that shape, reflect, and explain our perception or description of self and our world. Our worldview is the lens through which “we” (whoever we are) conceive of self and the world—or, more accurately, the community—around us.

Some contextual information is an essential backdrop. NAGPRA, the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, requires federally funded institutions to return human remains, grave goods, cultural patrimony, and ceremonial materials to the tribes or nations of origin. The private sector is not bound by NAGPRA, though the ripple effect of this legislation has been real for dealers, auction houses, and corporations. NAGPRA summons us all to review our conceptual frameworks and assumptions and consider the importance and value of the repatriation of ritual objects.

What has encouraged and continues to encourage collecting? Why do people collect? Here are but two reasons:

- Curiosity: A desire to understand life, find truth.
- Amassing: A desire to accumulate art and artifact, motivated either by an aesthetic appreciation of these objects or by the attainment of a commodity that enhances one’s wealth and power.

Both are worldviews.

And now, imagine a different worldview.

Shed assumptions, presumptions, and beliefs—and in so doing allow doors to open. Search for the possibility that more than one way exists to incorporate the past, that more than one way exists to absorb the present

that more than one way exists to view life and death

that more than one way exists to be with nature

that more than one way exists to be with humankind

that more than one way exists to view the world and really be present in it

that more than one way exists to view the universe

Grasping unfamiliar worldviews requires shedding comfortable conceptual frameworks.

Let's dismiss the notion of collecting as a superior model.

Let's discharge the idea that gathering and analyzing information is required to understand past and present cultures.

And, thanks to the great mind of Vine Deloria Jr., let's consider the possibility that "a singular difficulty faces peoples of Western European heritage in making a transition from thinking in terms of *time* to thinking in terms of *space*." According to Deloria, if time is our primary consideration, we do not arrive at the reality of our existence but instead are focused on abstract interpretations of the experiences themselves. For traditional American Indian cultures, truth is not what people *believe* to have happened, but that which is *experienced*. (For more about these ideas, see Deloria's *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*.) In Ram Dass's lingo "be here now." Space not time!

For Indigenous Peoples, experience (or being here now) is reality, the truth, the proof, and the only very and meaningful dimension of existence. No accurate understanding of objects or the cultures from which they were created can be learned when they are separated from their peoples.

Wisdom of the Elders: Sacred Native Stories of Nature, by David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson, describes the indigenous worldview of the universe as the "interplay of elusive and ever-changing natural forces, not as a vast array of static physical objects." To Indigenous Peoples, the collecting of artifacts, therefore, is neither representational nor informing. Spiritual revelations are captured through active ritual participation (i.e., ceremony). Western interpretations of the use and the aesthetic omit the essential component of Indigenous ceremony: the human presence.

Once again, I want to articulate the distinction between art that is appropriate for exhibition and sale, and ritual or ceremonial material whose primary use, hence value, is to the spiritual life of a living culture.

American Indians describe time as circular-natural cycles. Human beings are participants and preservationists in these cycles. By way of illustration, the use of certain ceremonial items, prepared in a certain manner and initiated in a certain way, is essential in order to sustain natural cycles. The removal of those items compromises a Native person's ability to participate actively in the preservation of the precious (and now precarious) world and ecosystem in which we all live.

Now, hold that worldview while we shift for a minute back to the concept of collecting. Amassing is part of the European heritage that contributes to contemporary American culture. It is the foundation upon which most of our competitive economy rests. It is also the fertile soil out of which collecting, in all arenas, has blossomed.

Today, consumerism is the food of the United States's most powerful educational vehicle—television. Ten years ago Jerry Mander estimated that the average television viewer watched five hours every day, bringing a bombardment of 21,000 commercials per year to each American viewer. The message, 21,000 times a year, is to buy more, to have more. At the same time, *Advertising Age* estimated that 75% of commercial network advertising was paid for by 100 corporations (today that figure is probably cut in half) of the more than 450,000 corporations in America. Buy more, have more. The relatively nascent Indian art market benefited from this consumer mentality. Once solely comprised of paintings, sculpture, and so forth, the art market expanded to include American Indian artifact as art. From the worldview of many Indigenous Peoples, collecting is unnatural and the conclusions about their cultures that are deduced from the decontextualized items are inaccurate. In addition, the insatiable, passionate exploitation of American Indian culture is painfully offensive.

In the pre-Bush Neanderthal days of 1989, debate around collecting was heated. Phyllis Mauch Messenger edited *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?* Karen J. Warren's introduction reminded us that we must always take cultural context

into consideration. For certain people “the past” is not viewed as property (or perhaps not even as “past”) and communal kinship is viewed as the “living past.” Further, we must take enormous care not to see as inferior, the sorts of concerns that indigenous peoples raise. Now, let’s shift to a discussion of what it means to have value. Again, this is a conceptual construct, so we must start by asking a question: What is the *source* of value?

Richard Handler, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, argues in favor of a contingent (or relativistic) position: Objects have no intrinsic value or meaning as isolated masterpieces. To have meaning objects must be surrounded by other objects, by words, by human activity. If this is so, labels are as irrelevant to the cultures whose works they “describe” as they are relevant to interpretive Western frameworks.

It follows that the value attached to an object is not intrinsic to it but is solely meaningful within a Western conceptual framework of a “collection,” since the material has been contextually severed from its function and culture of origin.

The meaning of collecting and the value of interpreting Indigenous material are no longer as obvious as they were in the past, and the practices are not as clearly defined. This is a hard pill to swallow for collectors and scholars, yet this is where we are.

What is the value of amassing objects under the pretext of aesthetic appreciation or love of culture when we know that an item is acquired despite the protestations of its original cultures? Is that not a contradiction, in addition to being morally untenable?

In the face of what is understood as offensive decontextualization, the resounding question remains: Are scholarly endeavors, aesthetic appreciation, or monetary gains acceptable motives? One can achieve a collection with a new kind of “value,” using different standards and approaches towards acquisition and information.

The new ethic of collecting includes reciprocity and proactive participation by a collector in identifying from American Indians what is appropriate to possess. Repatriation tells us that objects are not more important than human dignity.

Assisting in the revitalization of living cultures through communication and repatriation is a greater purpose than possessing even the most beautiful mask—and it provides even greater pleasure. For Indigenous Peoples, when objects are kept in a museum they are not being preserved; to the contrary, their life-giving purpose is obliterated.

We must abandon the idolization of objects, whose richest values are in communicating with the people who created them. From this flows the possibility for Western culture to collect knowledge and wisdom from Indigenous Peoples of this continent. From this position, a triumphant hybrid of legitimacy, respect, and integrity might emerge—an ethic of collecting with which we all can live.