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Figure 1. Polychrome vessel with design of quetzal bird. Ceramic vase from Copán, Honduras, 18.6 x 15 cm. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. 92-49-20/C211 T2597.

Boundaries crossed at the Peabody Museum

The interplay of anthropology, art, and textual studies

WILLIAM L. FASH and BARBARA W. FASH

The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University is the steward of priceless and irreplaceable material culture, but has always approached the curation and exhibition of its global collections from an anthropological viewpoint. Many aspects of representation and of cultural production, including hundreds of objects that most people would instantly categorize as “art,” are examined daily by museum staff, Department of Anthropology faculty and students, and—increasingly—faculty and students from a number of different academic departments at Harvard and beyond. While the field of anthropology itself used to be thought of as having four sub-fields (archaeology, social anthropology, biological anthropology, and linguistics), now people talk about it subsuming four hundred. Approaches to researching and representing our collections by the museum’s staff and the Department of Anthropology reflect much of that disciplinary diversity. The Peabody’s holdings are thus presently viewed, understood, and exhibited through multiple disciplinary lenses and from quite disparate political and philosophical stances. The scholarship and practices we engage in have long since crossed the boundaries between anthropology and the history of art,

The first author wishes to thank several colleagues for their help in shaping his thinking as Peabody Museum director. Museum colleagues Castle McLaughlin, Patricia Capone, and Diana Loren have been instructive regarding the advantages of intellectual exchange and co-curation with our Native American friends and colleagues. The director of the Harvard University Native American Program, Carmen Lopez (Navajo), has been a superb colleague to the Peabody and has earned the profound respect and gratitude of the Peabody staff. We continue to derive inspiration and counsel from the previous director of the Peabody Museum, Rubie Watson. Our colleagues on the Harvard University Art Museums Expanded Traditions Committee have been very forthcoming on many of the issues discussed here, especially Tom Cummins by his powerful expositions. As the published record shows, both authors have grappled with many of these matters for decades, and the research review the second author conducted for the Expanded Traditions Committee (Fash 2006) and for chapter VI of her thesis (Fash 2007) was the source for much of the material reported in the penultimate section of this chapter. It should also be noted that the title of the symposium at Harvard was the second author’s suggestion.

and our exhibitions increasingly reflect that. This is equally true for various scientific disciplines to which the Department of Anthropology is allied, in part through our immediate neighbor and sister institution, the Harvard Museums of Natural History. More importantly, our embrace of the viewpoints, counsel, and practices of living cultures whose objects we conserve, research, and exhibit means that we have crossed the boundaries of Western museology in our attempts to be responsible stewards of our immense and varied collections (Capone 2006).

Bridging the gap between anthropology and art history has long been a concern of the Peabody. One of the very first and most successful of the “boundary crossers” in the anthropology of art at the Peabody Museum was Monni Adams. Her marvelous ethnographic work on African art (Adams 1982) was so highly regarded that she was recruited to Harvard, precisely to bridge the gap between anthropology and the history of art. In 1999, Dr. Adams curated a very successful (and highly popular) exhibition at the Peabody Museum on the aesthetics and meaning of African headgear, not just masks, but headgear, that she aptly entitled “Heads and Tales.” The contextualization of the pieces was what made this lively and engaging exhibition such a great success, providing visitors with a deep sense of why headgear was important, how it was used in different ways to convey different messages, and what its value is to contemporary peoples of Africa.

In search of common ground: Context and meaning in cultural production

Obviously, the most successful “border crossings” occur when common goals unite people on both sides of a divide. In that context, it merits emphasis that it isn’t only the anthropologists who are making our borders more porous. At present it is quite common for art historians to delve deeply into anthropological theory, and ethnographic and archaeological site reports, as well as linguistic treatises on the reading of texts, in their analyses of art objects. A quote from an article

devoted to precisely this subject that appeared recently in *RES* serves to bring this point home:

The aim of both art historians and anthropologists in this field is the study of art objects from the perspective of their producers and users, and to analyze them under the three aspects of function, meaning, and aesthetics. One would expect to find the anthropologist primarily concerned with the meaning and the art historian with form. In fact . . . the great majority of the contributions by art historians of these last decades relate to the meaning of images and texts. In the Maya field, art historians have not only become enthusiastic epigraphers but have also developed the tendency of subordinating iconography to epigraphy. (Baudez 2002:139)

In the field to which Baudez refers, one object of study that was acquired by the Peabody back in 1891 has been of keen interest to both disciplines. I refer to the striking polychrome ceramic vessel that was chosen by the Peabody Museum's staff to represent our collections in the publicity for the symposium that generated this volume (fig. 1). Scientific analysis through neutron activation of the constituent chemicals of the vessel's clay indicates conclusively that it was manufactured at a ceramic workshop attached to the kingdom of Altun Ha, in what is today northern Belize (Reents-Budet 1994). From there it crossed the boundaries of several ancient Maya kingdoms before arriving at the city of Copán, Honduras. This famous piece is known as the Quetzal vase because of the depictions of quetzal birds on the walls of the vessel; for its artistry and glyphic text it is frequently requested for traveling exhibitions on Mesoamerican cultures.

In this image of the heart of the ancient city of Copán (fig. 2), an ink wash done by the late, great Russian-American scholar Tatiana Proskouriakoff, her vision of both the grandeur and beauty of that Classic Maya (A.D. 250–900) kingdom is apparent. Copán is best known for its naturalistic stone sculpture, upon which Proskouriakoff and a host of other scholars—both before and after her time—have shed much light. This image is one of the better known of the Peabody's enormous holdings of photographs, prints, drawings, and paintings. Proskouriakoff went on to decipher the historical portions of the Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions during her two decades of service as a curator at the Peabody Museum. She had a reputation as a relentless skeptic, a quality that served her well in her insightful, indeed, revolutionary scholarship.

Regarding Copán, the research that many fine scholars have conducted there over the past two decades also employs a cautiously skeptical, yet openly

eclectic, approach to evaluating what is knowable of the ancient past. This was summed up in an article in which the first author and Robert Sharer took issue with some colleagues for privileging one data set (obsidian hydration dates of visible mound sites) over all others, in trying to understand the history and cultural ecology of ancient Copán. In that review, it was posited that “findings to date demonstrate the advantage of conjunctive research that applies archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic data in a crosscutting, self-corrective strategy” (Fash and Sharer 1991:166). New data and approaches, including indigenous perspectives, challenge us to constantly revise our views on the critical issues at Copán and other New World archaeological sites and regions (Fash 1994; Fash and Fash 1997). Above all, they should teach us to be skeptical about approaches that rely on a single category of information, or way of approaching the study of ancient material culture, within the context of a university-based museum.

It's fair to say that a healthy skepticism abounds among contemporary anthropologists in general. Even before critical theory became the vogue in the humanities and social sciences, decades of anthropological research had shown that by cross-checking the results of the textual, pictorial, and behavioral studies conducted by different specialists, a much broader perspective is provided on a culture and its output than any field of inquiry could do on its own. In the research, teaching, and exhibitions at the Peabody, this cross-cutting, self-corrective research strategy has deep roots. Presently this is perhaps best exemplified by Castle McLaughlin's exhibition on our Lewis and Clark collections, “From Nation to Nation,” and her book, *Arts of Diplomacy* (McLaughlin 2003).

In McLaughlin's case the research strategy was supported and enhanced by intensive research on the provenance of the objects in the collections and profound engagement with Native American texts and several contemporary artists. Butch Thunder Hawk (Lakota) was one of those artists, all of whom both researched the Peabody's collections and drew inspiration from them in beginning new works of their own. Butch Thunder Hawk has recently returned to the Peabody as Hrdy Visiting Fellow to help design an upcoming exhibition on Plains warrior art, which will be complemented by a book that Castle is producing on Plains horse gear. The exhibitions and the catalogues of all of these joint endeavors provide us with a greater understanding of both the objects and their makers than had heretofore been possible. Similarly, Native American musician Willie French Lowery (Lumbee) has



Figure 2. Tatiana Proskouriakoff, *The Acropolis*. Carbon-based ink on medium-weight wove paper. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. © Harvard University, Peabody Museum 50-63-20/18487 T738.

also been engaged this year as a Hrdy Fellow, studying the Peabody's musical instruments and preparing an exhibition for the museum.

Visual anthropology and the study and exhibition of our photographic collections is another course that Rubie Watson charted during her inspired directorship of the Peabody. The recent "Marsh Arabs" photo exhibition, curated by Omar al-Dewachi, an Iraqi graduate student in social anthropology, brought home the point that the Peabody's collections often have tremendous emotional and political power, whatever their perceived aesthetic virtuosity. The reflexive nature of this and other recent exhibitions shows our willingness to question the colonial underpinnings of early anthropology, a subject that has been much explored by Michael Herzfeld (1987) and others in the Department of Anthropology. The Peabody's ongoing exhibition of the Berber cultures of North Africa, co-curated by Susan Miller and Lisa Bernasek, is another superb example of how diligent recording and research of provenance and cultural context illuminate our understanding of material culture. One should note that Berbers from all over the Boston

area came to the opening and have proudly brought friends and family to see the exhibition from the day of its opening forward. Diasporic exhibitions will continue to play an important role at the Peabody in the years to come, with photography providing a particularly powerful vehicle for them.

For the recent Mimbres pottery exhibition, the Peabody's director of collections and card-carrying field archaeologist Stephen LeBlanc devoted considerable time and effort to teasing out the meaning of ancient Mimbres pots from the Southwestern United States. LeBlanc has also gone further than anyone before him, including any historian of art, in trying to identify the painting styles of individual Mimbres artists. His catalogue for that exhibition (LeBlanc 2004) has won a number of awards in the museum world. Similarly, recently arrived Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs Jeffrey Quilter also has impeccable field archaeological credentials. Yet he has devoted years of his life to a sophisticated new theory and method for analyzing Moche fine-line painting, which he refers to as a "Narrative Approach" (Quilter 1990, 1997, 2001).

Through the controlled comparison of painted scenes, archaeological remains, ethnohistoric accounts, and comparative anthropology, he has reconstructed the broad outlines of Moche mythology, explicating its attendant rituals and art forms in the process.

Returning to the famed Quetzal vase, provenance could scarcely be much better. It was found by the 1891 Peabody Museum Expedition in an eighth-century tomb in the royal residential area of Copán, located on the south flank of the Acropolis, the civic-ceremonial nexus of the ancient Maya city. Re-investigated in the 1990s by E. Wyllys Andrews of Tulane University, this residential group produced a series of texts, pictorial sculptures, buildings, and behavioral remains that make it the best-understood Maya royal palace in the literature (Andrews and Bill 2005). We now know the names of the houses, the kings who built them, the names of the patron gods worshipped in the compound, even the name of the ward of the city where the royal residence was located. The secure and well-documented archaeological context enables us to date the tomb to the reign of the thirteenth ruler, A.D. 695–738.

Tomb 2 was found just west of the royal domicile and contained the remains of an adult male who was a member of the royal family, although not the king. Neutron activation analysis shows us that Copán enjoyed privileged access to the finest masterpieces from the Altun Ha workshop in Belize, including this one (Reents-Budet 1994). The Quetzal vase signals the elite status of Tomb 2's occupant, both as the possessor of such an exquisite drinking vessel, but also by its theme; for art historical studies have shown that the quetzal bird was the favorite of royalty, its iridescent plumes being the perfect ornament to their fancy headdresses and backracks. The quetzal bird signals noble status, and the divine right of royalty to ascend to the heavens. The hieroglyphic text has even been deciphered: "Here it is recorded, that this is the drinking vessel of the exalted lord." Therefore, the Peabody or any art museum could produce a compelling exhibition around such an object. To neglect the rich contextual information, however, would be to impoverish the museum visitor's experience.

Contemporary challenges in the world of anthropological museums

As we all know and appreciate, life in the museum world is much more complex these days, as Jacques Chirac has recently discovered at the Louvre. Claude Baudez's observations on events in his country were

indeed prophetic, particularly with regard to looted objects. This, just as the larger world begins to question the concept of ownership of collections, and embrace the notion of *stewardship* of objects and traditions. Again, quoting Baudez:

Thus to many anthropologists, the triumphant entry of primitive art to the Louvre was an opportunity to question the concepts of "masterpiece" and "authenticity" in non-Western art, to wonder about the virtues and sins of collecting and displaying primitive art, and to address the ethical question of acquiring and presenting possible stolen or looted objects. (Baudez 2002:139)

Christina Kreps (2003) notes that material culture was collected in the past for a variety of reasons including the desire to rescue it from extinction (Watson 1997:24). It was widely perceived that material culture holds tremendous scientific value, and is necessary for the advancement of knowledge of non-Western cultures and humankind in general (Clavir 2002; Pearce 1989). Finally, as Jonathan Haas (1996) points out, material culture contributes to cross-cultural awareness and understanding. Now that museums are "challenged with re-evaluating their justifications for collecting and retaining indigenous people's cultural property [Messenger 1989, Simpson 1996] the collection of indigenous objects for the sake of preservation, exhibition, and education for the public's benefit is no longer considered sacrosanct, and the cultural prerogative of museums" (Kreps 2003:79). Many objects considered significant or highly artistic should never have been removed from their original contexts (Harth 1999:279). The concept of "salvage ethnology" is seen as outmoded.

For Americanist museums, the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 ushered in a whole range of new challenges, and unquestionably new opportunities, for the exchange of cultural perspectives, understandings, and joint intellectual ventures in research and co-curation. At the Peabody Museum, and many others, NAGPRA has led us to appreciate how much we as institutions have to learn from contemporary Native American peoples (Watson 2004). It has also enabled us to enter into new kinds of understandings and agreements regarding the treatment of various classes of what Westerners refer to as "objects" (Capone and Loren 2004).

Often, such objects are central to a tribe's well-being, its sense of identity, self-respect, and empowerment. The law forces museums to comply and come to terms with their past collecting practices, but increasingly is seen as

a way to create new partnerships with indigenous groups that often feel disenfranchised or imprisoned by collections and archives (Galla 1977:143). For the Peabody's part, relevant staff believe we have already crossed the boundary into a "Post-NAGPRA world," in which our relations go beyond the letter of the law ("compliance") to the spirit of the law ("collaboration"). Signs of change at the Peabody include co-curation, incorporation of traditional care practices, the trading of information and goodwill exchanges, and curation in a culturally sensitive manner. As Kreps (2003:155) correctly observed, co-curation and sharing authority and power "should not diminish the role of professionalism in museums. Instead, it should widen the field and make room for the inclusion of other forms of knowledge and expertise."

Today the Peabody and other museums are looking for ways to repatriate and co-curate items that were removed from their cultural contexts in the past, especially objects that hold spiritual powers or are considered animate and living, needing special treatment and handling, as noted in the recent volume *Stewards of the Sacred* (Watson 2004; Capone and Loren 2004). Native American tribes insist that many objects should only be seen at certain times, or be allowed to be reused, or should return to the curation of tribal leaders who understand their proper roles and care. The proper care of sacred objects benefits all living people, but has special meaning for the tribe itself and for cultural transmission from one generation to the next. For all these and many other reasons, the Peabody's re-visioning of its Hall of the North American Indian, under the direction of Castle McLaughlin, Patricia Capone, and Diana Loren, has actively sought and received guidance and inspiration from numerous local Native American cultural officers and museum specialists, as well as museum specialists with deep experience in co-curation. This practice will continue as the museum heads into the planning phase of the project.

In Copán, we found ourselves negotiating among diverse, often competing stakeholders as we transformed our concept for a new museum, devoted to Copán sculpture, into a physical reality (Fash and Fash 1996, 1997). Two successive presidents (from opposing political parties), two successive mayors, three central government ministries, two successive directors of the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History, the mestizo townfolk of Copán, the indigenous people in the rural hamlets, and a host of scholars all provided cross-cutting, corrective input into the conception of this

particular offering to the world at large. The Copán Sculpture Museum stands today as but one example of how such negotiations across disciplines, stakeholders, and time itself can lead to productive learning and teaching, with each installation open to new interpretations (Fash 2007). But one of the most heartwarming aspects of it is that the material exhibited is so fresh and new that people actually read the labels! We hope that the signage helps all the visitors to cross many kinds of boundaries.

In preparing her thesis on the construction of the Copán Sculpture Museum, the second author was particularly inspired by Kreps's recent book *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation, and Heritage Preservation* (Kreps 2003). This provocative book challenges much of the accepted wisdom on museum practice in anthropology. Kreps argues that contemporary museum practice in anthropology is not a distinctly Western concept. This outmoded thinking is a result of a belief in the "superiority of Western, scientifically based museology and systems of cultural heritage preservation" (ibid.:1). This mindset has prevented Westerners from seeing traditional methods of care, display, and preservation for objects of special value and importance as legitimate forms of museological behavior.

The Copán Sculpture Museum reflects the larger phenomenon that as museums spread across the planet in both urban and remote locations, they take on local cultural characteristics to respond to the needs and perspectives of their host communities. This contributes to the global exploration of non-Western people's own models of museum and curatorial practices. While museums continue to be "contested terrain" for discussion of who holds the power to represent culture (Karp and Lavine 1991), Kreps maintains that many museums, specifically anthropological ones, are finding productive ways to engage with indigenous communities to define frameworks for respectful collaborations. Rather than dwell on the critical theory debunking previous Eurocentric assumptions that shaped museums in the past, she examined how "changing attitudes towards cultural property ownership and its curation are mirroring the changing nature of relationships between anthropology museums and native peoples" (Kreps 2003:3). The body of the book provides compelling examples of this dynamic new approach to heritage preservation and interpretation in Indonesia, North America, and Africa.

A relatively new term in recent decades, "cultural conservation" (or cultural preservation) is a primary

concern for the museum world, as Kreps ably elucidates. This new paradigm embodies an integrated view of heritage that fosters local involvement and expressions of identity. This “new museology” does more than just preserve the collection, or guide a museum’s exhibition practices. It aims to transform the museum into a democratic, educational institution with potential for promoting social change (ibid.:9). By supporting knowledge, customs, traditions, and values habitually associated with objects and living culture, communities regain control over their identity, their past, the present, and continuing development in museum settings.

An important concept at work in museums today is the notion of cultural hybridization, conceived by Kreps (ibid.:14) and other practitioners as a two-way loan reciprocation between cultures that creates an environment for fluid cultural evolution. Although care must be exercised in its applications (for example, to avoid promoting assimilation or acculturation), cultural hybridization in the museum world can allow for non-Western curatorial methods to flow into public institutions. It allows for each entity to be understood, exist, and be respected on its own terms, while coalescing around unified goals (ibid.:153). In pursuing this, Kreps analyzes the Eurocentric museum model in the non-European world and explores innovative ways indigenous museums have challenged its hegemony. This often involves professional museologists and anthropologists sharing their knowledge with local people who, in turn, explain how traditional approaches and belief systems capably employ similar methods. The fusion of these two approaches results in museums where curation may vary, “but their long term goal is the same, and that is, the transmission of the culture from one generation to the next” (ibid.:45).

New spaces at Harvard: Can we expand traditions and cross boundaries?

We now find ourselves in a changing landscape, both intellectually and physically, in the museum world at Harvard. As we try to expand our horizons philosophically, the university is also engaged in serious planning for new physical installations in the neighboring community of Allston. In coming to grips with the many ways in which we would like to share research and teaching agendas, physical spaces, and various public and curatorial facilities, we are also coming to terms with a changing terminology. Can we expand our time-worn terms, or drop them for others? If we accept that there might be “museums” that are not

called “museums,” can we not also accept that there might be “art” that is not called “art” in our new spaces? From the perspective of the Peabody Museum and our social anthropologist curators, *Liberating Culture* and the scholarship that it synthesizes show that material culture by non-Western people that is held in Western institutions (including anything called “art” by Western culture) is best curated in an anthropologically sensitive manner.

Our own Western “modern art” is closer to touching on these features by confronting and challenging the boundaries of tradition (Marcus and Myers 1995:6). From our perspective, having modern and contemporary “art” be part of a shared venue, or a near neighbor, with an Allston venue for the Peabody would create a most welcome aspect of reflexivity of our own culture. We need not be so concerned with defining what is art, but instead search for cross-cultural anthropological insights that help erase the distinctions between exotic and unique Euro-American art and “art” from distant places and times (Morphy and Perkins 2006:3). Crossing over disciplines requires anthropologists to acknowledge that the general concept of art is relevant to understanding the role of such objects in human social life. They must also guide the understanding of art as a whole, to go beyond visual art to include other media such as performance (ibid.:12). The cautionary side of this is to prevent Western categories of art from expanding to swallow up the arts of other cultures (ibid.:13).

The Yekuana of South America make a distinction between material culture made by their hands (*tidi’uma*) and that made from the outside and lacking significance (*mesoma*). The making of *tidi’uma* requires development of the maker’s intellectual capacity, for it incorporates symbolic and metaphorical significance into the objects. Just as ritual actions may be said to necessarily accompany all material ones, “the symbols incorporated into the manufacture of all *tidi’uma* require that every functional design participate in a greater cosmic one. . . . To become a true Yekuana is to become a true artist . . . those who create the most skillfully crafted objects are the most ritually knowledgeable members of the community” (Guss 1989:69–70, 2006:374–375). The more complicated the object the more complicated the esoteric knowledge incorporated into its design. That basket weavers help to define a community and are judged in quality reveals the value placed on aesthetic and technical skills combined. Going beyond form and function, the greater dimensionality of these objects must become the way they are understood and appreciated. The converging symbols and meanings they

holistically embody become a narrative subtext of tales and chants. The preparation of materials and the objects daily and their ritual use mirror the culture itself (Guss 2006:385).

As this final example illustrates, questions loom large in both anthropology and art history as art and culture are recognized as inextricably related. How can art historians and anthropologists find ways to bridge their differences while remaining true to their own disciplinary programs? The successful, sustainable, and equitable joining of anthropological and art historical approaches has been in motion in relevant scholarship for decades now. As the second author (Fash 2006) noted in our Expanded Traditions Committee deliberations, the fact that this seems to be satisfactorily achieved only rarely in museum contexts points to the need to set aside the categories that get in the way and to engage with new approaches. Happily, such new perspectives and engagements are well in evidence in the "Crossing Boundaries" symposium and in the resulting selection of articles published here.

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