Toward a Mutual Understanding Through Culture:
Art and Politics in the Past Century

Ian Wardropper
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An Interview with Luke O'Connell
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Ian Wardropper (B.A. Brown 1973) has served as the Director of The Frick Collection since the fall of 2011. After completing his PhD at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, he was curator and later head of the department of European Decorative Arts, and Sculpture, and Ancient Art at The Art Institute of Chicago for 19 years, until returning to New York in 2001 as Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Chairman of the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He has organized over 20 exhibitions in his specialties of European sculpture, earlier decorative arts, and twentieth-century design and decorative arts. He has taught art history at six universities and published numerous books, catalogues, and articles. His most recent publications include European Sculpture, 1400–1900, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Bernini: Sculpting in Clay; Limoges Enamels at The Frick Collection; *and* The Frick Collection: Director's Choice.

***Brown Journal of World Affairs*:** What is the goal of the Frick Collection?

Ian Wardropper: The Frick is an unusual museum. It's a house museum, and what distinguishes it is the quality of the collection. It's one of the best collections of the European period from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century. It was a private collection, now a public one, which was formed by Henry Clay Frick, but most people don't know that his daughter, Helen Clay

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Frick, also had a role after her father's death in promoting the collection and acquiring works. Her interests were somewhat different from her father's—she collected Italian Renaissance art, for example. Some of the greatest works of our collection—such as those by Duccio, Cimabue, Piero della Francesca—were actually collected by her. I think people also don't always know that the Frick continues to collect. The door didn't close after the death of Henry Clay Frick or of his daughter—we still collect to this day.

Visiting the Frick is an opportunity to see some of the finest works of the Western tradition, but through the lens of private collectors. Most museums are more corporate in the sense that they have been collecting over time under a number of different collectors and curators who have had acquisition funds—and most museums cover a wider range of territory. The Frick doesn't pretend to do that. Rather, it reflects the collecting interests of a couple of people and the traditions that have been followed after their deaths. It collects in a very personal way. We don't show everything of all periods, nor do we display them in that way. If you walk into most museums you will see French eighteenth century in one room, and Italian Renaissance in another room, and maybe even more specifically divided up: you have Bolognese art in one and Roman art in another. The Frick displays in a more organic way: we will have Italian Renaissance *cassone* (marriage chest) mixed with French seventeenth century paintings, with textiles from different periods. We might show Chinese vases as well. It's more of a personal experience that you can immerse yourself in and find what you love.

We are very interested in educating people once they have developed interests, but we love to let people go on their own and find what they enjoy and then educate themselves, rather than have them come into a space knowing that they're supposed to learn about the history of art—there is a subtle distinction there. Like all museums, our primary role is to preserve, collect, study, and explain the works of art. So our role primarily is as a kind of transmitter of culture. Were it not for museums, many of these objects would be lost—they wouldn't be conserved and preserved. They might not be studied, and the general public may not have the opportunity to see them. That's really the primary role of museums. They play greater and greater roles in society today, but at essence we are preservers and transmitters of culture. I think one

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of the great virtues of museums also is as doorways to history. There is such an emphasis on contemporary art today, and people may lose those connections to the past, so I think we have a critical role in those connections.

But the other thing that I really cling to and love about museums is that it is very hard to classify them. They can be anything to anybody. Somebody can come in and suddenly make a connection and have an interest in another culture, which they may not have been aware of before. Simply by walking around the rooms of a museum they may find themselves fascinated by ancient Assyria, something they may not have known anything about. So I think it's just as important that we continue to play this role. And obviously collecting is part of how objects get into museums—whether through private collections or through the agency of museums actually going out and buying things. I believe firmly in the importance of the continuation of collecting, which is a millennia-old practice. But one has to collect responsibly, and that's what has increasingly become an issue over the last several decades. And I feel that though there is still a lot of work to be done, there's been a lot of progress made in museums toward establishing guidelines to promote responsible collecting within the field.

***Journal*:** How would you interpret today's trend in museums toward collecting responsibly? What does the Frick specifically do to collect responsibly?

Wardropper: One thing that's really important is documenting provenance and then making the records of the works in our collection available to the general public and researching the provenance of works of art. When I started out in museums in the late 1970s and 1980s, we always, of course, tried to find the provenance of any work of art that we were going to acquire, but there was less of an emphasis on it, and frankly, it was more difficult to do. In the case of famous works of art, there is often a track record that one can follow. People would keep records, keep inventories—one could trace those things. But there is also a huge number of works of art that are very difficult to follow. So for example, if you go into your house or apartment right now, could you identify where you acquired every single object? Or if you got things from your parents—say you inherited them—would you know where your parents had acquired everything? That's just two generations. If you're going back hundreds or thousands of years, is it truly possible to follow the provenance of every single work of art? In the case of many famous objects you actually can, but in the vast majority of objects—particularly multiple objects, say coins or bronze statuettes, in which many of them were produced from a single die or mold—it is much more difficult to

know where they originated.

Museums are now documenting and doing provenance research, which is becoming increasingly sophisticated, while making all of this available to the public. This has all advanced partly because of the pressure from various sources. In the case of antiquities, for instance, countries of origin have been putting pressure on Western museums to document the provenance of objects. By "countries of origin," I mean countries such as Italy and Greece that produced works of art in antiquity have aggressively, but often appropriately, put pressure on Western countries, resulting in increased provenance research. And so that has spread from antiquities into all fields, where it has been less of an issue. Thus for modern art, for example, we now are practicing much more rigorous and sophisticated provenance research. There is also the whole issue of art during the Nazi era, which has also, especially over the last 30 years, increasingly become an issue. And these are all very healthy discussions. This trend has drawn the attention of collectors and museums, and the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) has responded by developing guidelines to promote a greater diligence and transparency among museums in acquiring works of art that may have changed hands during the period.

One of the greatest problems in the legality of the restitution of works of art is the question of ownership versus export laws. The United States has been open to suits brought by countries of origin and has been setting up separate agreements with individual countries concerning their import laws. I think there's been a lot of progress in these areas, particularly in U.S. museums, in terms of behaving more responsibly, but part of this is also simply due to the Internet. Thirty-plus years ago it was much harder to find and disseminate information; now most U.S. museums follow the best practices as articulated by governing bodies such as the AAMD, of which I'm a member, that have clear guidelines on publishing objects that are collected and making them known to the world. The Internet's been quite useful in this regard. Previously, it was much harder to find where objects came from, to find other objects around the world, and frankly, to even define what was in museums. You would have to go to libraries and look up catalogues, which might be out-of-date. You now can update on a regular basis everything that's in a collection and make it available.

All of these questions about ownership and documentation, I think, are healthy. In fact, there have been a number of cases in recent decades of U.S. museums repatriating ancient objects: the Metropolitan Museum, for example, gave back the Lydian Hoard and the Euphronios Krater; the Getty Museum gave back a number of objects to Greece; the Boston Museum of Fine Arts repatri-

ated a number of objects; and the Cleveland Museum has as well. I think U.S. museums are really doing their part in trying to follow the rules and to behave ethically, as well as of course legally, within the international legal framework.

I'm wrestling with this because there's a number of intersecting questions here, which are coming to bear in my comments. I think the other issues, which I know are being touched on in some of the other essays in this issue of the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, have to do with looting and what countries can do in times of war to try to safeguard, and eventually return, works of art that have been stolen or put in jeopardy. This is an old problem, of course, dating back millennia because countries have always plundered from one another in times of war, going back to ancient times.

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But let's stay in more recent times. If we just look over the course of the last 100 years, the Frick played an interesting role in World War II, for example—at its beginning and end—in safeguarding works of art. The Frick Art Reference Library is one of the top art reference libraries in the world, and it's particularly strong in areas of provenance. This is because Helen Clay Frick, the daughter of Henry Clay Frick, founded the library in the 1920s and very quickly started creating a photographic archive of works of art. It's very difficult for us today when all of us carry a camera in our pockets—an iPhone or some other device—to imagine how difficult it was to find good images or reproductions of works of art. But in the 1920s and 1930s it really was difficult, so she set out to commission good photographs of works of art, which helped to promote the study of art history. Another byproduct of that was that in the course of taking all of these photographs—which were then logged in our art reference library, mounted, and studied by scholars—that all the scholars that came in would add more information: the condition, attribution, who had painted the work of art, but also its location if it had moved from one place to another or if it had changed in its condition.

So the Frick now has 1.2 million photographs of works of art, and we now also have one of the greatest collections of auction catalogues—often annotated auction catalogues going back into the seventeenth century. And we're now one of the primary resources for the study of the history of collecting and of the provenance of works of art. Because of that, at the beginning of the Second World War, when Allied bombers first started making sorties against Germany,

the Frick Art Reference Library closed for one of the only times in its history, in order to do research to produce maps for the Allied bombers to know what not to bomb, and what the most culturally significant and important locations—both of monuments and collections of works of art—that should be preserved were. There were around 700 individual maps that were drawn up and given to the pilots to guide them when they were doing these sorties in order to protect the art. In times of war, it's very difficult for anything to be safeguarded, but an effort was made.

At the end of the war, the flipside of that was the restitution of works of art that had been stolen or moved or changed hands, and again the Frick Art Reference Library was a beginning point for proponents of that effort who eventually became famous as the Monuments Men (the subject of a recent movie), and became part of a more national effort to try to identify and return collections to their rightful owners.[1] So libraries, museums—many of the Monuments Men were museum men—can have a role in repatriating works of art and have a crucial role in bringing objects back to their rightful place. I think it's important to identify the function that museums play in not only preserving and transmitting cultures, but also in educating by identifying the history of a work of art and trying to establish the chain of ownership and provenance through the years. This ultimately created a greater understanding between different countries and different cultures insofar as a work of art can help one understand the essence of another culture.

When I came back to New York in 2001, I was chairman of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum, I happened to begin work the week of September 11. I have this vivid memory of going up onto the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum and seeing black clouds of smoke coming from the World Trade Center. It was an astonishing week: the city was in shock and a lot of people sought solace in museums at that very moment, which is one thing that museums do—they provide a harbor, a place for people to feel that they can contemplate and think about the world, the past, today. But the other lesson that was vivid for me that particular week was that it happened to be that the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum were closed. They had been closed for some years because they were going to renovate them, and at that very moment—it was exactly the moment when we needed, I think, to have examples of Islamic art available—there was this sudden

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antipathy between the "West" and "Muslim nations." At that particular time, above all, we needed a better understanding of Islamic culture, through works of art, through literature, or through any other way. Our conversation reminded me of these two critical roles that museums can play, both in providing a place of contemplation and understanding of other cultures.

***Journal*:** You spoke about how, for example, people in the West could learn about Islamic art and better understand cultures both contemporary and ancient. Is the inverse present? I'm aware of Western art museums across Asia and the Middle East—could you speak to the role that they may play?

Wardropper: I'm less familiar with the Middle East and Asia because I don't travel in those regions as much—but I think it's also true, as you suggest, that there's a mutual exchange. A number of countries, for example Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have been building museums that not only are putting together great collections of Islamic tradition but also great collections of Western art. It is a move in a very positive direction that both sides of that equation want to know each other better through collections of art, and I think it is also a very good sign that we are really seeking to know one another culturally through this venue. There's also been much more of an effort to exchange exhibitions back and forth. For example, the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum have made great efforts to send exhibitions often to countries that don't have access to such works of art, and this, I think, really does help in terms of mutual understanding.

Works of art can be ambassadors from one country to another, and that's something that's been a very positive trend. Often, Western museums and institutions may have more resources than countries in Africa or the Middle East, and there have increasingly been initiatives from agencies such as UNESCO, the World Monuments Fund, and individual museums such as the Getty Conservation Center to send teams of people to help other countries in their conservation efforts, either by directly doing conservation or, even better, by training local people to do conservation. That is another way in which it's been a very good exchange, as well as bringing curators and conservators from such countries to the United States to learn the most recent practices. So this is also something I'm very happy to see become almost one of the norms of international exchange today.

Journal: Could you talk about what frameworks the international exchange of art works through? You mentioned UNESCO as an example—is it the predominant body in this field, or would you say that there are many others?

Wardropper: It's one out of a number. UNESCO has really played one of the most important roles in bringing forward cultural patrimony laws. The UNESCO Convention of 1970, as it is often referred to, was really one of the first international agreements that tried to create a body of laws to address the illicit trade in cultural property that has had a lasting impact on museum collecting practices.[2] I happened to be in charge of the collections of antiquities at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1980s through the 1990s, and at that time we had our own small, but good, collection of ancient art. We didn't collect extensively, but we were collecting, and we needed to come up with our own guidelines for responsible collecting. So at that time we decided to adopt the UNESCO Convention, and one of its main points was that nothing that wasn't known or published prior to 1970 was to be acquired. It was kind of an arbitrary date, but that was the year when the convention was adopted, and we were operating at a time when there wasn't very much to go on in terms of clear legal precedent.

So we chose to work with the UNESCO Convention. Today, UNESCO continues to have a very important role in helping to broker laws between various countries and fostering a responsible understanding of practices. UNESCO certainly has an important role there, but ultimately it has to do with increasing understanding and good faith practices by museums; it is for them to decide what the right thing to do is.

It's difficult to truly establish ownership, particularly of antiquities in which the boundaries of ancient cultures don't necessarily coincide with the current political boundaries of countries. Every country has different laws that don't necessarily accord with U.S. laws. These are really difficult issues and it was very contentious in the 1990s and early 2000s. It was the archeological community pitted against the museum community—there were accusations on both sides. In the end I think we've come to a better position of understanding and there have been a number of settlements—for example the Met returning the Euphronios Krater. The Met has an agreement with the Italian government that it would lend important works

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of art on a regular basis in return for the Euphronios Krater. So there are more constructive attempts to find ways to make exchanges of works of art, rather than simply returning works of art, under the principle that we all believe in the importance of cultural understanding through art. As such, I think there have been promising developments over the past 30 years: we're witnessing not only a greater understanding of exchange practices legally, but also a greater effort to find mutual ways to promote international understanding.

***Journal*:** Are there discrepancies between museums in the United States, in the U.K., across the EU, or further into Eastern Europe and Asia, with regard to their definitions of fair exchange of cultural histories?

Wardropper: That's a difficult question to answer. I think U.S. courts have been more open to claims from foreign countries than European courts have, which perhaps explains why many cases have come here. So from my point of view, it hasn't always been fair, but it has kind of pushed forward many of these issues and made them public. Ultimately, I think it's a good thing that we've all come to a clearer understanding of what our ethical responsibilities are.

***Journal*:** To follow up, do you see the supremacy of U.S. courts over other international courts continuing in arbitration related to art and similar legal cases? Or do you see the potential rise of a formal international body for such disputes?

Wardropper: I, for one, would love to see uniformly accepted international standards. We're all working toward that end, but it's obviously a very difficult thing to do. And when one thinks one's made progress in an area, suddenly something seems to revert in another. So one example that I have been thinking about recently is immunity from seizure. The U.S. enacted laws that provided protection from seizure to encourage loans of art from foreign countries. After 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and more openness from Russia, for example, suddenly after all those years of no regular exchanges of works of art between Russia and the United States, there was wonderful cooperation for a number of years.

If one was doing an exhibition in the United States, one could finally have the great works that were currently in the Pushkin or St. Petersburg in international exhibitions. This hadn't been possible before, and we were all so heartened by that. Now, for the past five years, no works of art have been sent from the Russian state collections to the United States because of a legal dispute

around the threat that the claimant would attempt to impound art sent to the United States from Russian museums. Though we have immunity from seizure laws, and they've been quite successful, the Russians decided not to test them. And so, sadly, what had been a new golden age of artistic exchange between Russia and the United States is now back to a state even worse than it was during the Cold War.

***Journal*:** That is a pity considering that those museums in Russia, such as the Hermitage, Treyatov Gallery, and Pushkin Museum, have fantastic collections—unparalleled by a lot of other museums.

Wardropper: I also have very fond memories of having taken exhibitions from the United States to the Soviet Union, from the Met and the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1980s, and seeing how much it meant to the Russian people, particularly in the Soviet era, to have exchanges of works of art. They were so excited, and those exchanges were so meaningful to them. It still reminds me of the power of cultural exchanges.

***Journal*:** What factors do you think play a role in striking the balance between preserving one's culture and sharing one's culture? For instance, what is the museum's role in presenting U.S. art? Or in the case of Greece, what is the museum's role in exhibiting Greek art as opposed to sharing the art with other museums for educational purposes?

Wardropper: The whole question of American art in U.S. museums is an interesting one. To a large degree, the formation of U.S. art museums in the late nineteenth century began with European art. The colonists had come from Europe; they were oriented toward Europe. In the United States, for a long time, there was this sense that "American art" was never as good as European art. That changed over time, as it's often a question of what the dominant cultural center is. At one point it was Rome; at another, Paris. Then at another it was New York in the 1940s and 1950s. For a long time, there wasn't necessarily a sense that U.S. art was something that, say, Europeans or the rest of the world wanted to see. I think we are now seeing more exhibi-

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tions of American art travel.

Another side of this dynamic is when an art exhibition is, in reality, an act of political propaganda. During the Cold War, the U.S. State Department would subsidize concerts of U.S. jazz or exhibitions of U.S. art that were sent abroad to try to bring artistic expressions of democracy to other countries. I think we're in a different place today, though one should always remember—I'm speaking of the lofty goals of mutual understandings—that there often is a kind of political agenda to art as well. One would do well to remind oneself of that.

At the same time, the Louvre helping to establish museums in the Middle East is doing something similar for France in promoting its national goals. There has always been that dimension, and one always needs to keep it in the back of one's mind. In the largest sense, if an exhibition of U.S. landscape painting was sent to Germany and was well received, I think at its purest level that is a way of understanding that there is a quality of art that is peculiar to the United States and that and there is a topography, a landscape that is essential to identifying what the United States is. An exhibition of landscape painting can actually open the eyes of foreigners to a greater sensibility of what America is about. At the same time, it may be promoting American values in the background. There are political elements to works of art, though ultimately the reason that I, and most people, work in museums is that we believe culture is the essence of who we are and one of the most basic ways of understanding how people think.

***Journal*:** Are museums comfortable with that kind of politics?

Wardropper: We try to keep away from it. For the most part, it's not an issue, but I think that we always have to keep in mind, for example, who's paying for an exhibition. Is there someone that might profit from it? We clearly have to be above suspicion or the perception of anybody having influence on what we say. It's tricky. There is often someone who has to pay the bills, and so people may ask where the money is coming from. But, for the most part, the foundations, private patrons, and governments who support art exhibitions do so for the best possible reasons, which is to make art available to as wide an audience as possible.

Notes

1. *The Monuments Men*, film, directed by George Clooney (2014).
2. UNESCO, Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970).