

# THE ETHICS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

*Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice*

EDITED BY

CHRIS SCARRE AND GEOFFREY SCARRE



### CHAPTER 3

## *Who guards the guardians?*

*Oliver Leaman*

There was a time when collecting artistic and archaeological artefacts was widely regarded in a very positive light. Both private and public collectors saved objects so that the public could experience those objects and the scholarly community study them. A good indication is the title of a recent book (published by the Hayward Gallery) by the British National Art Collections Fund which provides funds for museums in Britain to buy works of art. It is called *Saved!* But gradually this activity came to be questioned. Much of the material in museums was acquired by dubious methods, it has been argued, and is presented in patronising ways. For example, 'primitive' communities are presented through their artefacts as exotic and we often treat important religious symbols as just things to be gaped at as representatives of a very alien way of life. We may even display their dead as items for public entertainment and study in ways that would lead to questions were we to be dealing with corpses from our own culture. On the other hand, the recent von Hagens 'Bodyworks' display of dead bodies in a variety of poses suggests that breaking taboos in this area is a potent source of audience attraction. Even though the bodies come from people who have voluntarily consigned them for display, or so we are told, one might wonder what point is made by their manipulation into unusual poses and public display. An even more potent issue is raised in the case of bodies that have been acquired perhaps by dubious means, certainly without the consent of who they were when alive, and perhaps in contravention to the cultural beliefs of the community from which they came. Related issues arise for artefacts that are collected by museums and individuals. Issues arise such as who has the right to own such objects, and how they should be displayed and preserved. It will be argued here that the present rather messy lack of resolution of these issues is not without its cultural advantages.

There have in recent years been protracted disputes about whether artefacts ought to be returned to their original owners. In many cases

the original owners are no longer alive and it may be that the artefacts are so old that the whole notion of an original owner is obscure. Those now living in the territory may not even want the artefacts, if they are of no great monetary value. On the other hand they may, and they may claim with some degree of plausibility that the artefacts have great religious and/or national value, so that the grounds for restitution are *prima facie* even stronger. The most famous such case in Britain has been the case of the Elgin Marbles, parts of the Athens Parthenon now residing in the British Museum. They were removed from their original site by Lord Elgin in the nineteenth century after he had come to some arrangement with the Turkish authorities who then ruled Greece. The Greek authorities have argued that the Marbles ought to be returned to Athens, where they will be reunited with the city from which they came and where they will be well looked after by the appropriate authorities. These provisos are interesting, since they imply that the issue is not just one of ownership but also one of who is going to look after the artefacts best. Can rights to ownership be abrogated by poor guardianship? Can the inability of the British Museum to display the Marbles in their original setting, or something close to their original setting, disqualify the Museum as the owner of the Marbles?

The precedent of returning the Marbles is quite horrifying to museum authorities, of course, since much of what reposes in their possession has a similar provenance to the Elgin Marbles, or a much patchier one. The fact that there may be official bills of sale is not that relevant, since it is accepted that contracts made under duress are not valid, and a much more recent phenomenon is the forced sale by Jews of art at low prices to Germans. The original owners and their descendants have rights to those artefacts despite the 'legality' of the contract, since they would not have freely sold their artefacts had they not been forced to do so. This is even more clearly the case where such property was confiscated, despite the legality of the confiscation at the time. This seems a reasonable question to raise: would the original owner have freely entered into a contract to make the sale unless undue pressure was applied?

This question works for Jews in the twentieth century who were dispossessed of their art, but is more complicated for the Elgin Marbles. Who originally owned the Acropolis? Certainly not the Greek republic, but the Greek state might be assumed to have taken over the rights of preceding regimes in the Athens area with respect to what used to be there. It is worth noting here though that the builders of the Acropolis would possibly have been horrified at the notion of a Greek state and its

power over Athens itself, the significance and independence of which is symbolised by the Acropolis from which the Marbles were taken. Would the Greek government have a stronger case if the gods were still worshipped in Greece, perhaps as the official religion of the country? They cannot plausibly claim to value the objects as religious objects; clearly the issue relates to the much wider question of who if anyone should own what. If there is to be property, and individuals and organisations and states are allowed to have it, then they need to ensure first that they are entitled to have it. Within a system of law this is of course a legal question, but it is also moral. Who deserves to own a rare and beautiful painting, for example? If I own it and restrict its audience to my friends and me, we might object that this important cultural resource was being unfairly restricted. If I use it as a table or a dartboard, it is being badly treated or even destroyed. Yet we do not normally take property away from people just because they abuse it: were that to be the case then incompetent gardeners would lose their gardens, bad drivers their cars and so on. Perhaps they all should, but there is good reason to think they should not, especially when the consequences of incompetence are limited.

Perhaps the relationship we are interested in is not so much that of owner/owned as guardian/treasure. We do allow pretty incompetent parents to look after their own children, and quite often other people's children also, but if their incompetence reaches a certain level, the children are removed from them. Although *prima facie* parents have primary responsibility for their children, they can be relieved of this by displaying signs of inadequacy. We might have a system whereby artefacts are looked after by whoever owns them with the proviso that they can be taken away if they do not do a good job, the sort of system we have with children, and also animals. What is different about children and animals, as compared with other sorts of things that we control? The obvious answer is that these are conscious organisms that can suffer, and we cannot allow people to treat them as inanimate objects. On the other hand, cultures trying to get back their artefacts often claim to regard them almost as living things, as parts of their culture and lifestyle that are so intimately linked with them that their loss is a palpable harm to the body politic. Interestingly, in cases where artefacts are returned with no problem on either side it is often because the country that has them is either embarrassed about owning them or makes little use of them. A good example is the recent agreement of Italy to return some Eritrean architectural objects that clearly were acquired during the colonial period, hardly

a time for Italians to be proud of, but also because the Italians did not make much use of them. So their return hardly mattered, not to the Italians in any case.

An important fact about artefacts is that they cannot suffer. Apart from this, a problem with treating artefacts like children is that it would put the state in a paternalistic relationship with its citizens over issues that do not relate to life and death, health and happiness. It is reasonable to expect the state to monitor my treatment of my child, whether she is well fed and healthy, since she could so easily be otherwise and I could be the cause. Yet should the state have the right to check up on my management of artefacts, to see if the air conditioning is working properly, perhaps, or that they are not placed in direct sunlight, or misused? This point about artefacts being like children is an interesting one and leads to questioning whether there is just one notion of ownership. It is often argued that one reason why collections should not be made of cultural products is because those products are still capable of playing a role in the social life of the culture from which they come. The fact that they are old does not matter, and in fact may lead to them being even more important. What right has a collection to hold on to those things if they play a significant role still in their culture? This notion of a culture being owned by a community is an interesting one, and in some ways quite novel. Native American culture might be thought to be a part of American culture and so it might be thought to be entirely appropriate for American museums to contain examples of that culture. When critics of such ownership describe it, they suggest that crass museum directors are intent on ripping the heart out of local cultures and then display the artefacts in a cold and isolated environment, so that there is no context in which members of the public can understand the real role that they possess. There is certainly a good deal of crassness in the insensitive presentation of such material, but this is not an issue about ownership, but rather about how that ownership should be translated into display.

In the foyer of Lexington Theological Seminary is a Sefer Torah, a scroll of the law, written in Hebrew and displayed open at a particular place and reposing in a glass case. No doubt the seminary has legal ownership of this object, but it is certainly being displayed in ways that resemble only very distantly its normal use in synagogues only a few miles away. These scrolls like this are used in services and the law is read from them every week. But the display in the seminary is not disrespectful: the scrolls are not in a cocktail bar, for instance, and Christians might be expected to be interested in artefacts from a religion that predated their

own. This brings out the useful point that perhaps ownership and display issues are not that unrelated. If something is poorly displayed, it raises the issue of whether it ought to be owned by the displayer. This issue is certainly relevant if the artefact is kept in a way that damages it physically, but is also relevant if it is displayed in ways that imply disrespect for it and the community of which it was a part. On the other hand, one would not want to say that the artefact would need to be displayed in line with its normal use since that would mean it could not be displayed at all.

Of course, a very important caveat here is that the question of ownership in general is very complicated. Some people argue that taxation is unacceptable since it interferes with the basic right of the individual to own property. Other thinkers dispute the notion of private ownership and would no doubt be amenable to the idea that important cultural objects should all be publicly owned if owned at all. This is not the place to examine all these different arguments, but they are clearly highly relevant to the topic of who should own or look after cultural artefacts. If there is to be completely unfettered private property then we clearly cannot argue with the right of collections to own cultural artefacts, since why should such possessions be treated differently from anything else? In the United States NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Public Law 101-601, 104 Statute 3048 (1990) (codified at 25USC 3001-3013 (Supplement V 1993)) does not cover private collections of Native American bones, for instance, although it does affect public collections. It returns artefacts connected to the remains of Native Americans to the community from which they were taken, including the remains themselves.

But if we think that ownership of property does need to be justified in terms of other moral or political criteria, then it is a live issue as to whether cultural property was really come about fairly, and if it is now being looked after properly. This notion of being fairly acquired is not as simple as it looks. If I go to a yard sale and spot a valuable bowl being sold for 25 cents and buy it, have I fairly acquired it? If I think that a particular stock on Wall Street is undervalued and buy it, and then it goes up in price, have I fairly acquired it? We would normally say yes. There is a very entertaining short story by Roald Dahl in which an antique dealer comes across a valuable piece of furniture, but he is intent on buying it as cheaply as possible from the simple farmer who owns it. He says he will return to pick it up, they agree on a (low) price and the dealer says it will really only be good for firewood. When he returns he finds that the owner has literally transformed it into firewood by chopping it up! Which of course he had every legal right to do, given his ownership of it.

We are critical of owners of property who allow their property to deteriorate, and not only owners of cultural artefacts. Someone who does not adequately look after anything is liable to be criticised for waste. In the case of cultural artefacts it is also an issue of something perhaps quite rare or even unique disappearing. A cynical owner of rare possessions might destroy some of them in order to increase the value of the others, of course, although one hopes this is not something that owners of public collections would contemplate. They do sell things, on occasion, and also decide not to display things, leading to the question of whether they are the right custodians of them. But as we know, collectors may be carrying out a very important function just by preserving things that are no longer of particular public interest, perhaps because they have just gone out of fashion. Even if they never come back into fashion, the collector is carrying out an important task by looking after them and no doubt writing about them also.

We are beginning to see now that there are some distinct arguments that can be discerned:

- 1 legal ownership of cultural artefacts is the only relevant category of possession;
- 2 legal ownership of cultural artefacts can never be absolute since they belong to a wider community;
- 3 legal ownership is largely irrelevant, what is relevant is desert;
- 4 human relics fall into a special category and should/should not be treated like everything else.

At the moment we have some variety of these views being held often at the same time in different permutations, and that makes the whole issue rather confusing.

Let us try to work out some rules for good behaviour in collecting. First, the ideal position is where the artefact is not far removed from its original environment, but is left there after having been excavated and placed within both its original natural context, in so far as this is possible, and together with other related objects that form its cultural context. Let us admit frankly that this is often not feasible. It may be that the country in which the artefact exists is intent on destroying it, or on stealing it and selling it on the international market, or is not capable of displaying it properly. In the latter case a strong case should be made for helping the country and providing the resources and expertise necessary for this to happen. In a kleptocracy this is a waste of time, and similarly in a hostile environment the only plausible strategy may be rescue rather than

anything else. To suggest this is not to be imperialist or colonialist but merely to recognise the facts. Many former colonies frankly acknowledge the importance of the transfer of much of their earlier documents and artefacts to the imperial country since this has preserved them from almost certain destruction. There has in recent years been a particularly nasty trend in civil wars to attack the cultural heritage of communities that are perceived as hostile. The best example of this is the bombardment of the main library in Sarajevo, the repository of so much important cultural material particularly of the Islamic heritage of Bosnia. It is interesting that in a war resources should be spent in destroying what was primarily a cultural facility, but it should be hardly surprising, since in the history of the twentieth century cultural artefacts were always closely identified as objects of hatred. The Nazis preserved a few Jewish things in order to preserve an account of what they hoped would be an extinct race in the fullness of time, but apart from those things, they set out to destroy whatever else they could. In situations like that rescue is the only feasible strategy. A good example of this is the store of Afghan antiquities set up in Switzerland with the blessing of UNESCO, where cultural objects exported from Afghanistan (in theory illegally) could be 'rescued' and await repatriation to Afghanistan when security is restored, and a more amenable government in place. Of course, the previous regime was hostile to many such antiquities and had little compunction in either selling them or even destroying them. Actually, when one considers the long history of destruction of Buddhist objects in what is today Afghanistan by a variety of iconoclastic rulers it is remarkable that anything has survived!

There are difficult cases here. If a country is unable to look after its artefacts as well as a foreign country, does that mean that the latter should take them over? We suggested earlier that this might be seen as the worst kind of paternalism and imperialism, and no one likes to be told that they cannot handle their own affairs, especially if it is true. We need some notion here of an artefact as belonging much more generally to the world than to the country in which it happens to be found. It is not difficult to find such a notion, since many countries do restrict their inhabitants' use of their private property if that property has cultural significance. It may be their house, it may be their pictures, but there will often be restrictions on their use and sale. The state justifies this intervention into the area of private property by saying that the right to dispose of one's property as one wishes is limited by the public good. So one needs some concept of the public good on a universal scale to justify restricting what the

\*



individual property owner may do. Even if the owner in the case of a museum has the best of educational or curatorial purposes in mind, an argument needs to be established that their ownership and manipulation of the artefacts are really in the public good.

The principle worth considering here is that if a museum wishes to own an object, and keep on owning an object, it has to show that it has a well-developed plan to make that object generally available to the public in a meaningful way. This is especially the case if there is a possible claim by someone else to possess the artefact. For example, most countries impose restrictions on their citizens, and others, in their ownership and treatment of artefacts that are held to be significant culturally in some way. Often houses are designated as historically important, and the owner cannot just do what she wants to it. Objects are sometimes not allowed to be exported, or not before an exhaustive process of looking for a local buyer is completed. These all represent violations of the liberty of the individual to do what she wants with her own property. From a liberal perspective restrictions on liberty are justified in terms of potentially greater liberty consequent on such restrictions. So we would have to argue that preventing someone from exercising their liberty to sell something they own is less serious than preventing the public at large from experiencing that object. Once the object has gone elsewhere or been irretrievably changed no one is then free to see it, and so a liberal argument could be found to justify and explain the restrictions on ownership of historically significant artefacts and art objects. *THIS IS CONTRA NAGPRA, for example.*

Opponents may say that in general museums that get to own objects do not display them all the time (absence of space) or even ever, and that most such objects repose forever in the vaults and are only ever seen by scholars. Are we justified in keeping objects in that way? Exactly the same point may be made when a child is taken away from its parents and put under the control of the local authority, or the state or whichever social agency arranges these things. This can also result in a worse state of affairs than if the child is left with the parents, and that is why the decision to remove a child is not taken lightly. Alternative forms of parenting are often not successful; they may be even more abusive than the parents and the child may end up in a worse situation than he would have otherwise. Since everyone knows this, the onus is very much on the agency that wishes to remove the child to argue that it is really in the child's best interests. This gives us a good model for dealing with the artefact case. If we are going to remove an object from its owner then the onus is on us to show that it would not only do better than with its present owner, but

that its present owner in some way represents a danger to the object's future. This might not be so much that he is going to mistreat it, but that if his purchase of the object encourages illicit pilfering of sites, and so a market for such objects, it may encourage further pilfering and the general destruction of such sites.

This has an interesting correlative in the case of children, of course. Many people in prosperous countries who cannot have children themselves acquire them from people in poorer countries, or from poorer people in their own country. It is a benign activity on the whole to match up families with children they cannot look after and do not want to look after with families who are prepared to look after them. But it leads to a market in such children, with fees, different prices and all sorts of quasi-legal and legal obligations between the parties. The state intervenes also by insisting on some adoption and naturalisation formalities. Who owns a child that was born in China, say, and has been legally adopted by an American couple, after a certain amount of money has changed hands? Not the original parents, one might say – they may have had the child purely in order to sell it after all – but difficult situations do arise where the natural parents renege on a deal, or where they later on try to assert their rights to the child. When prospective parents see a child not being well looked after, and they have the opportunity to 'save' it, and take it away with them to a country where it will be much better cared for, it looks very much as though that is what should happen. The similarity with artefacts is quite clear. Yet as we have seen, the question of ownership is not decisively settled by considerations of who would best look after the object in question. On the other hand, it might be said that the best owner has a strong claim on the object if the issue of whom it legally belongs to is in doubt.

The claim of the putative 'best owner' is harder to make than one might think. The Greek government might claim that the Elgin Marbles are at present displayed entirely inappropriately, out of context, and yet it would be difficult to argue that they are physically more at risk now than were they to be attached (or reattached) to the Parthenon in Athens, or if they were put in a museum in Athens. On the other hand, the point about context is more than a minor one. NAGPRA calls for the restitution of human remains to their original context, in so far as this can be managed, despite the fact, and it surely is a fact, that they may be more likely to be damaged or even destroyed in those surroundings. The view here is that the rightful owner morally of something has the right to use it as he wishes, and some damage is inevitable if an object is actually part of a

\* using the adoption market as an analogy for antiquities

living tradition rather than just an exhibit in a museum. (It might be thought that this legislation is based on the idea that it is wrong for anyone to own bodies, or parts of bodies. But that cannot be the case, private owners are excluded from the law anyway, and it is not just bodies that are returned from public collections, but everything that goes along with the bodies and is part of the burial ceremonial ritual. It is worth adding that other bodies such as Egyptian mummies are not part of the legislation, and there are no plans for returning them to Egypt.) Of course, damage may also occur in a museum: exhibits disappear and are stolen, and inappropriate curatorial methods may harm them. On the other hand, although we rightly criticise the ways in which the smuggling of artefacts deprives countries of their cultural heritage, there is a lot to be said for the spreading out of such artefacts. This is helpful to public education, at the very least, but also prevents a disaster in one place from totally wiping out a cultural tradition. As we have seen, there has been a long tradition of wiping out not just people but their cultures as well, so the dispersal of people and their artefacts is a highly pragmatic measure that makes the survival of some examples of both at least more likely.

If we accept that the owner of an artefact does not have the right to do anything she wishes to it or with it, then how do we assess that treatment? Does this mean that all owners of artefacts, both public and private, need to be inspected to see that they are doing the right thing? We should follow the analogy of artefacts with children here. No one bursts into my house to check that I am not mistreating my children unless there is evidence that I am. That seems reasonable; we have to assume that most parents do their best to look after their children and do not require regular inspection. On the other hand, if my child fails to thrive or appears to have unexplained bruising, then this may be grounds for investigation. Similarly in the case of artefacts, if museum workers are seen in the pub lighting cigarettes with what appear to be medieval manuscripts we might want to investigate them. With respect to private owners of artefacts, the state might wish to intervene if there was evidence of imminent or past harm to artefacts, on the grounds that restricting the liberty of some is permissible in order to preserve or increase the liberty of the community at large to enjoy a relationship with those artefacts. But does not the fact that those artefacts are in private hands restrict the public anyway, since they may not be available generally to public view? It does, but private ownership increases the value of artefacts and makes it more likely that they will be conserved properly. A mixture of private and public ownership is probably the right way to go, since the state is unlikely to wish to

divert the resources necessary to own, preserve and display all of a country's artefacts. In any case, private owners can indulge private interests, and thus preserve material that an official body might discard as insignificant. This is useful since it can lead to a much broader definition of what counts as worth collecting as compared with some official consensus on the topic. Whatever imperfections result as a consequence of private ownership of artefacts, and there are many of these, there is no doubt that there are considerable advantages also. Governments have generally recognised this by offering tax breaks and other incentives for private owners of cultural artefacts, to acknowledge their preservation efforts and possibly the granting of public access to them.

It is then generally accepted that there is no absolute right to do whatever one likes with cultural artefacts, although the restrictions differ from country to country and even between regions of the same country. There is today often a suspicion of the motives behind the urge to collect. Lord Elgin was, as far as we know, governed by financial concerns to a large degree when he decided to remove the parts of the Parthenon that subsequently became the Elgin Marbles. Belzoni played a large part in discovering and popularising Egyptian antiquities, and really approached the area like an entrepreneur interested in making a quick buck. This buccaneering spirit is much disparaged today, but to a degree it has been adopted by the museum sector. Museums conserve, preserve and display, and these all seem like positive actions, but they may contain material that is of dubious provenance. Many museums in former colonial countries possess rich collections from their colonies, often of considerable religious or cultural significance. There are many paintings and sculptures in museums all over the world that originate in Jewish property from Europe that was acquired in questionable ways. It is difficult for the owners and their descendants to establish their right to this property since the records are often deficient and there has been little serious effort to discover the original owners anyway. Then we have issues of what is displayed and how it is displayed, what sorts of issues of hegemony are involved here, and how far does the broad community in which the museum is situated find its concerns and interests reflected in the museum? What is the community that the museum addresses, the people who live nearby, fellow citizens in general or indeed the whole world?

It would not be difficult to construct a list of requirements for a museum that would outline what it needed to do in order to fulfil its function ethically. A problem is that each museum's list would be different. Some would argue that museums should not display artefacts that

have or had a symbolic meaning connected to a foreign culture, since this is condescending with respect to that culture. Some would argue that dead people should not be exhibited. An exhibit in the Liverpool Museum of a mummified hand of a child had been removed when I was last there because it was the hand of a child. In the next glass case there were mummies of adults, but for some reason it was held to be insensitive to display a limb from a child's body. Some would argue that the artefacts should only be displayed or indeed held on to if their provenance is beyond challenge, and if there are no issues about exploitation, colonialism and so on tied up with their ownership. In recent years the right of guardians to look after anything has often been challenged, and the self-confidence of curators has taken a knock. Yet one could well argue that this critique has gone too far. There is a lot to be said for continuing the rather imperfect system that leaves the precise details of looking after artefacts to both the individuals in the private sector and the professionals in the public sector, and we get to this argument through the comparison of artefacts with children.

As we have already seen, the welfare of children is given such a high priority by the state that children will be removed from their natural parents if there is evidence of ill-treatment. But the state will not actively check up on parents' treatment of their children unless there is some prima facie suspicious evidence. We know that some children are brought up in very strange ways. Some religious communities, for example, do not allow their children to watch television or even eat with members of other religious groups. Some parents who are racists may well infect their children with their prejudices. Some parents spend a lot of effort feeding their children with what they take to be healthy food, while others do not even think about it. One of the advantages of this relative laissez-faire approach is that it recognises the fact that we really do not know how children ought to be brought up. Different people have different views and it is in our interests to have different experiments in living going on at the same time, since then we shall be better able to make informed judgements. We do limit parents here, and certain experiments in living are held just to be so potentially or actually harmful to the child that they cannot be tolerated. Yet the home in which the child is brought up is on the whole an unregulated place and the state will not intervene unless it has some reason to do so.

Exactly the same argument can be used for the guardianship of artefacts. Of course stolen property should be returned, if it can be, and artefacts exhibited sensitively, but this does not mean that there is only

one way of carrying out these desirable policies. One of the advantages of the present system of ownership of artefacts is that there is a wide variation in approaches, and so no general orthodoxy prevails. Private collectors who indulge their personal passions and exclude the public from what they collect will eventually create collections that have a tendency of finding their way to the public anyway. They die, they try to preserve their estates from tax, they wish to be awarded honours or receive the plaudits of the critical world. More importantly, they can follow their own path; they are not limited by what is currently fashionable or valuable. Usually they will, but the private collector may preserve material that would otherwise be consigned to the rubbish heap. Later on it may be thought to be significant, or more significant than was previously thought. What is regarded as important periodically changes, and so it is a good idea not to try to define for all time what is important.

No consensus then exists as to what should be collected, or how it should be displayed or preserved. Even were it to exist in the public sector, it would be unlikely to prevail in the private sector, perhaps a good reason in itself to have such a sector. Stolen property should be returned, and it is worth noting that on the whole there has been no attempt to do so as opposed to it being the case that this is difficult. For example, the huge Mauerbach collection in Austria of confiscated Jewish property was replete with documentation identifying owners, yet nothing was done while there was a possibility of tracing those owners until it was too late. Many items from the Nazi period are now in private and public collections and could have been returned to their rightful owners or their descendants. This need not make all collectors or museum employees feel guilty, though the fact that there are such cases means that increased vigilance should be used to prevent them in future, not that we should all feel that we have dirty hands. It is often said that trade in cultural artefacts is the third largest illegal industry, after drugs and arms smuggling, and auctions in the west of such material are often notable for their relaxed attitude towards provenance. A more rigorous approach by potential buyers to where the material actually comes from would have a radical effect on the market itself, and do something to ensure that collectors are not dealing with stolen property.

This is an important aspect of what it is to be the guardian of artefacts, but not the most significant. As I write this in April 2004 the Brooklyn Museum is about to present itself as a new and exciting institution. It has apparently given up trying to attract Manhattanites to its exhibits and is going to try to bring in more local residents. So the security guards and

*in favor of individual ownership*

curators have apparently had 'greeter' training and the explanatory labels are much shorter and simpler than in the past. A particularly popular exhibition in 2002 was 'Star Wars' that displayed a series of costumes and drawings from the movies. Some have criticised this as the shallow attempt at gaining popularity at the expense of scholarship, but others argue that it will bring more people in and they will then possibly go to visit the more serious side of the museum's work, the fine art, the archaeological material and the rest of the collection. Other museums take different approaches, and indeed in the past the Brooklyn Museum took a different approach. It may well take a different approach in the future from its present policy. There is no one strategy that is acceptable here; in many ways it is preferable to have different curators going in different directions, and then we shall be able to observe this variety and come to some informed attitude on the best direction. We can then argue that the diversity of forms of proprietorship of artefacts is ultimately the best state of affairs. It leads to a diversity of ways of collecting and exhibition, and that reflects the essentially contested nature of guardianship itself.