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**“Una Cosa Culturale di Qui”:
The Battle for Monteleone’s Stolen Chariot**

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“No one owns culture. It belongs to the world.”
—Lawrence Fleischman

“What do you need to know? We want it back. That’s all.”
—Alfredo Ceccarelli

In April of 2007, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened to the public what director Philippe de Montebello described as its “majestic” New Greek and Roman Galleries. Among the highlights of this “museum within the museum” was a 2600-year-old Etruscan chariot whose bronze panels depict scenes from the life of Achilles. The often misnamed Golden Chariot, which the Met acquired a century ago, was recognized even then as a major find: an early 20th century observer called it “the only genuine complete ancient chariot in existence” (G.F.H. 1916: 160). As the centerpiece of the new galleries’ upper level, it is protected by a glass case and surrounded by explanatory labels. One of the labels, “The Acquisition,” reads as follows:

In 1902, a landowner working on his property accidentally discovered a subterranean built tomb covered by a tumulus (mound). His investigations revealed the remains of a parade chariot as well as bronze, ceramic, and iron utensils together with other grave goods. Following the discovery, the finds passed through the hands of several Italian owners and dealers, who were responsible for the appearance of the chariot and related material on the Paris art market. They were purchased in 1903 by General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, the first director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This sparse official story, while not technically inaccurate, leaves out the most interesting piece of information about the object’s acquisition: the fact that, since 2004, the people of Monteleone di Spoleto, the village where the chariot was discovered, have

been contesting the museum's claim of ownership. Their fight for the return of the chariot—the Italian is *biga*—is one battle in the ongoing repatriation wars which, for about twenty years, have been challenging conventional views of “who owns the past.” In this paper, I want to explore some questions raised by what the Met label leaves out, and to examine the emotional and ethical investments in the case of what Italians call the *biga rapita*, or “stolen chariot.”

La Biga Rapita

“Stolen” is a strong term, and it suggests the people of Monteleone may have, or think they have, a legal right to the return of the *biga*. Such is the opinion of Mario La Ferla, an Italian journalist whose recent book *La Biga Rapita* presents a more detailed, and more troubling, story of the acquisition than the Fifth Avenue label. His story line, as it appears in the book and in his frequent press releases, goes something like this.

In 1902 a farmer, Isidoro Vannozi, discovered a chariot and other grave goods on his property near Monteleone di Spoleto. Needing money to purchase roof tiles, he sold the items to a businessman from nearby Norcia, who transported the chariot to Rome, where it was stored for a time in a pharmacy. There it was seen by the American financier J. P. Morgan, who “fell madly in love with it” (La Ferla 2007: 3). Morgan bought the chariot and smuggled it out of the country, first to Paris (where it was stored in a bank basement), and then—its dismantled parts hidden in a grain shipment—to New York. In 1904, when he succeeded Palma di Cesnola as the Met's president, he donated the chariot to the museum. News of this created a furor in Italy, with one member of parliament, a Signore Barnabei, denouncing “Morgan il pirata” for violating a law protecting archeological patrimony (La Ferla 2007: 87; cf. Italy 1904, *New York Times* 1904). The furor died down, but the fact remains: “The *biga* was stolen from Italy by an American who had bought it from a shrewd Roman merchant” (La Ferla 2007: 4)

This tale of Morgan's skullduggery is, for the Monteleonesi, the accepted history. For example, a tourist pamphlet published by a local support group, Pro Loco, announces unambiguously that the *biga* was “stolen along with the rest of the hoard” and “transported clandestinely” to New York (Termini 2005: 5). In a press release issued by the village itself, entitled “Operazione Recupero Biga,” cultural affairs officer Marisa

Angelini sums up the story of the chariot's disappearance by writing, "The Biga of Monteleone [was] stolen in violation of the laws in force to protect Italian artistic patrimony" (Angelini 2007). In both of these documents—as in La Ferla's book—the operating verb is *trafugare*.

The belief that Morgan violated an existing law drives an effort to reclaim the chariot that is being led by a one-generation-removed native son, Tito Mazzetta. An Atlanta-based lawyer whose mother was born in Monteleone, Mazzetta says he is related to "about 90 percent" of the current inhabitants, and he has taken on their cause, pro bono, as a "duty" to the village (Fox 2007). In 2004, he wrote Montebello, stating that the Met's prize exhibit had been "illegally exported," that it is "part of the Italian national patrimony," and that it "must be returned to its place of origin and to its people" (Mazzetta 2004). The museum's director did not deign to answer directly. Instead, its general counsel expressed "surprise" at the "futile legal claim." The Met had owned the chariot for more than a century, she pointed out, "long after any legal claim could be timely brought"; hence "we respectfully decline your demand that we relinquish ownership." (Cott 2004). In response, Mazzetta cited the Italian laws that were broken by Morgan (and by Isidoro Vannozzi), claimed that Met officials in 1904 knew the chariot was looted, noted that the museum had produced proof neither of ownership nor of Italian government approval of export, and invited the Met to "make a great and civilized gesture" by voluntarily returning the precious object (Mazzetta 2005). This second letter was not answered, yet Mazzetta says he is not discouraged. Even if it takes a century, he says, the *biga* will go back to Italy.

Journalists writing about this case are partial to two metaphors: that of Don Quixote pursuing his impossible dream, and that of David battling Goliath. Both images suggest the power differential between the Met and the hill town. But as sympathetic as we might be—as we should be—to the underdog, the case is not best understood as a clash between urban arrogance and rural naïveté. The question isn't just who should own this object, but what is the appropriate way for us to think about cultural property that, legally or not, has been transferred from a "source" country to a foreign market. Since items like the *biga* are commercial as well as cultural assets, there are economic issues

involved here—a fact that adds to the original question of “Who owns this piece of culture?” the more pragmatic one of “Who should *profit* from its ownership?”

In debating these questions, culture specialists fall into two main camps. Essays in the art and archaeological press—there have been dozens of these in recent years—describe these camps as internationalist and nationalist. The Met’s position puts it squarely in the former camp, while the villagers’ demand reflects cultural nationalism.

Stewards for “All Mankind”

The internationalist position has been forcefully argued by Stanford legal scholar John Henry Merryman, in an influential paper (1985) on the Elgin marbles. These of course are the sculptures which once adorned the Parthenon and which for the past 200 years, thanks to Lord Elgin’s (disputed) purchase of them from the Ottoman empire, have been among the most visited exhibits in the British Museum. Merryman begins from a premise articulated in a 1954 Hague convention: the idea that “cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever” is “the cultural heritage of all mankind” (cited in Merryman 1985: 1916). This being so, Merryman argues, items of cultural property should be owned by those who are best equipped to enhance their preservation, their integrity, and their “distribution”—by which he means accessibility to all who wish to view or study them (1917-1921). In the case of the Marbles, despite the fact that their removal from the Acropolis disrupted the architectural integrity of the Parthenon, they are, he notes, better preserved in London than they would be in smog-begrimed Athens; while their distribution—that is, exhibition—to “all mankind” is being managed more effectively by the British Museum than it would be by Greece. The museum, in other words, is a better steward of our common heritage than Greece; thus the marbles should remain where they are.

Not surprisingly, those involved in the trafficking, purchase, and display of antiquities are fervid champions of the internationalist view; many of them work with or for museums, and they tend to see those institutions as repositories of cultural wealth held in trust. This view clearly informs a 2002 document, “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums,” issued jointly by eighteen such repositories, including the Louvre, the Prado, the Hermitage—and the Met. Noting that “museums serve not just the

citizens of one nation but the people of every nation,” the declaration defines the value of stewardship proudly: “The universal admiration for ancient civilization would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums.” (cited in Reppas 2007: 105-106). Thus not only do museums, like Rome’s vestal virgins, keep the flame of culture alive; they ensure that all who wish to do so may be warmed by its presence.

James Cuno, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, another Declaration signatory, is a particularly vocal internationalist. Likening museums to “land trusts or centers for the preservation of endangered species,” he claims, “The museum’s responsibility is a moral one. To preserve the cultural and artistic diversity of humankind is good, and...the museum is given such responsibility as a matter of trust” (Cuno 2005: 143). You can sense the fiduciary analogy here, as well as the belief that “human culture” has a right (actually a duty) to trump all narrower sentiments. The same beliefs inform the words of antiquities collector George Ortiz. “There is no such thing as national patrimony!” he says. “Just like there is no such thing as pure race. Cultures are influenced by surrounding cultures and those that came before them” (cited in Vincent 1995: 86). Therefore—here’s a noble leap on his part—“Instead of each little group claiming its own heritage, we need to create one common culture by allowing art to circulate around the world” (85).

So much for the internationalist view. What about that of the cultural nationalists? Here, rather than quoting the experts—and there’s a strong vocal contingent of scholars who dispute the museums—I’ll describe what the people of Monteleone di Spoleto told me when I asked them what they thought of *Operazione Recupero Biga*.

Village Voices

My wife and I visited Monteleone in the summer of 2007, just months after the *biga* had been installed in the Met’s new galleries. I had already spoken briefly with Tito Mazzetta, and we had read U.S. news reports about “Umbrian umbrage” (Povoledo 2007) and the village’s “angry” mayor, Nando Durastanti (Kannampilly & Bova 2007). So we expected a village up in arms, uniformly fervent about regaining its heritage.

The first person we talked to, though, did not share this fervor. The afternoon we arrived, we had just sat down at a café when we were approached by a wiry, quick-eyed woman probably in her eighties whose manner sent me to my pocket dictionary for the Italian equivalent of “feisty.” This, it turned out, was Pietrina Vannozi, a direct descendant of the *biga*’s discoverer, Isidoro. With one hand on her cane and the other making rhetorical points in the air, she regaled us for half an hour with the town’s misfortunes (young people leaving for the city) and with the pointlessness of trying to regain the chariot. “Who owns it?” she said. “The Greeks. And it’s been gone for 100 years; you don’t ask for it back now. The whole thing is absurd.”

Since this was the first opinion we encountered, we wondered whether the New York papers had gotten the local sentiment wrong. But Pietrina, it soon became clear, was an anomaly. After she ambled off, we asked the café owner—a friendly young man named Roberto Vannozi—whether many people in town shared her view. His indulgent smile hinted that she was a bit of a town character. “One or two, maybe. No more.” And then, simply: “The *biga* belongs here. Not in New York.”

Everyone else we talked to echoed that sentiment, and no one more enthusiastically than Alfredo Ceccarelli, who runs the café across the street from Roberto’s. An ebullient, garrulous man who spent several years working on the Carnival cruise lines, he’s the town’s one English speaker, which considering our rudimentary Italian proved a break for us. His response to my question about the *biga*? “What do you need to know? We want it back. That’s all.”

Alfredo’s enthusiasm is shared by the town’s equally ebullient mayor, Nando Durastanti—the first-named plaintiff in lawyer Mazzetta’s petition. On the café wall there’s a picture of him standing on the steps of the Met with a sign announcing “Give us back our *biga*.” Nando has been widely interviewed, and he seems to relish his dragon-baiting role. But he’s quite serious when he reflects on the Met’s intransigence, and on the failure of the Italian culture minister, Francesco Rutelli, to support the village’s claim. Montebello and Rutelli, he says, are *sordo*—deaf. And worse than deaf: insensitive to the concerns of his tiny village. “*Loro mangiano, mangiano,*” he tells me over a coffee, making it perfectly clear that he’s speaking of class. People in power sit down to dinner together while the needs of a hungry community are ignored.

So there's an economic element to the Recupero initiative, and nobody is more alert to this than Giuseppina Venazzi. Alfredo Ceccarelli's sister, she runs the village's office of cultural affairs, a cubbyhole crammed with books, posters, and photographs of medieval-style pageants and archaeological digs. A warm, hospitable woman, Giuseppina wants the *biga* back as much for its commercial as its cultural value. "If it came back," she says, "there could be a museum here." Tourism is already a factor in the town's economy—the big buses start climbing the hill in mid-June—but anyone with an interest in Etruscan chariot design has to be satisfied with a replica *biga* that, when we visited in early June, was still locked in the crypt of a Franciscan church. Giuseppina knows that with the *biga autentica*, not the *copia*, in place, the fortunes of the village might well rise.

Her husband Pietro is a sturdy, jovial blacksmith who left Monteleone as a young man to work in Rome but later returned because, as he says simply, "I changed my mind." He points with pride to the many railings and gates that the men of his family—including the couple's two sons—have contributed to the town, and then he jangles a string of keys he has at his belt. "*Le chiave al cielo*," he jokes, referencing his namesake San Pietro. He points to himself, then to heaven, and flashes a smile that, if not for the context, might be called devilish. "*E pazzo*," says his wife, with obvious affection.

It's Pietro who sums up the town's attitude toward the *biga* most economically. Yes, there would be money to be had in its return. Yes, it would be the right thing to do. And yes, there's historical significance. But in the end it's a local feeling, blunt and uncomplicated. "What's the *biga* to you?" I ask him. With as much fervor as he has just pointed to the gates of heaven, he now points, defiantly, to his own spot of earth. "*E una cosa culturale di qui!*" he practically shouts. It's a cultural thing of...here! It belongs not to the world, or to New York, but to us.

That's the cultural nationalist view, as seen from the ground. To the internationalists, it's sectarian, regional, provincial, selfish, backward—pick your patrician jibe. One of my favorites comes from a Met spokesperson, Harold Holzer, who when asked about the *biga* told ABC News, "Asking for this chariot to be returned because it belongs to Italy is like saying that the Met should not exhibit anything that isn't from New York. It's absurd, and the height of insular thinking." (cited in Kannampilly & Bova 2007).

Perhaps. But this charge, like the internationalist position in general, makes assumptions about culture and property that bear deeper examination than they are commonly afforded. To the museum community, these assumptions are examples of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) once fruitfully labeled doxa: those elements of worldview that are so deeply, unconsciously, accepted that they are beyond—perhaps beneath—examination. Let me question a few of them here.

Interrogating Doxa

Consider first how readily Merryman and Cuno and Holzer echo the Hague's collapsing of local traditions into that portmanteau category "the cultural heritage of all mankind." The phrase is shimmeringly hopeful, and one shrinks, in these days of ethnic ferocity, from raining upon anyone's parade of common humanity. Yet only in the most abstract sense does the idea "all mankind" have any saliency. A Greek object held in trust by an American museum may, conceptually speaking, belong to the world; but it's still a Greek object in an American museum. Neither its Greekness nor the ethnic sentiments sparked by its Greekness are diminished by the museum's genuflection toward universal humanity. The phrase "all mankind" finesses rather than solving any controversies over physical possession—which, after all, is what the whole debate is about.

That possession, moreover, brings the possessor economic gains that are not in any meaningful way shared with the global community for whom the possessor is holding objects in trust. The antiquities collector Lawrence Fleischman may say disingenuously, "No one owns culture; it belongs to the world." (cited in Vincent 1995: 86). But when he sells million of dollars worth of artifacts to the J. Paul Getty Museum, he acknowledges implicitly that the objects were, on Tuesday, owned by him; and that now, on Wednesday, they are owned by the Getty. The world, financially speaking, doesn't enter the equation (Elia 1994).

Or consider Merryman's linked notions of preservation and distribution. It seems obviously laudable to preserve items of value so that others may appreciate them. Think of James Cuno's statement: "To preserve the cultural and artistic diversity of humankind is good." Yet this proposition isn't as universally axiomatic as Cuno's phrasing suggests. It wasn't axiomatic for Byzantine iconoclasts, or Puritan image-haters, or the Taliban

shock troops who destroyed Afghanistan's Buddhist statues. Nor, more benignly, is preservation a unquestionable given among makers of Hopi sand paintings or the folk artists of the festival Burning Man or—to bring the matter closer to home for folklorists—to Barre Toelken when he determined that the “world's” right of access to the Yellowman tapes was trumped by the right of a smaller community to keep that particular artifact to itself (Toelken).

Consider finally the internationalists' conviction that they alone are equipped to safeguard humankind's treasures. There's a lively debate in today's art community over whether source nations' own museums might not meet the preservation requirement as well as the big museums do, and this is leading to repatriation successes in some quarters. So far, though, the onus is still on the source nations to prove that they won't fumble the stewardship ball. This conservatism is understandable, but we should be mindful of how it sustains traditional concentrations of cultural property.

Merryman acknowledges—but I think underplays—the danger here. “One can imagine,” he writes, “the unpleasant extreme of a Third World denuded of cultural property in order to stock the museums and the private collections of a few wealthy nations.” (1985: 1919). In fact one doesn't have to imagine this. One can simply visit the Met or the British Museum. At those sites, as at all universal museum sites, while the cultural flow may be outward to “the world,” the capital flow is inward to specific constituencies. Those constituencies seldom include members of the communities from which the precious objects were originally removed.

One final bit of doxa to be interrogated: Merryman's notion that, in debates over cultural property—or anything else, for that matter—*reason* is a more reliable guide than emotion. “If the matter were to be decided on the basis of direct emotional appeal,” he admits, the Elgin Marbles “would go back to Greece tomorrow....But feeling alone is an unreliable guide to the resolution of important controversies. Our position ought to be based at least in part on reasoned, principled grounds” (1883). In an article entitled “Thinking about the Elgin Marbles,” published in the *Michigan Law Review*, we shouldn't be surprised to encounter this type of Enlightenment bias. But let's remember that, like the appeal for preservation, the appeal to reason over emotion betrays a cultural

predisposition that doesn't automatically become unassailable just because it happens to be *our* predisposition.

I won't argue that we should set reason aside and simply trust our gut feelings. I want to suggest rather that the traditional contrast between reason and emotion may be a false dichotomy, and that in assessing the validity of Monteleone's claim, we should listen just as intently to an Umbrian blacksmith's "emotional" appeal as to the "principled" arguments of a California law professor. If we accept Merryman's premises, then Monteleone's demand might indeed seem "unreasonable" or (here are the hidden implications) as "ill-informed," "backwards," even "childish." Such characterizations, I want to suggest, reflect a traditional "Pleasant Peasant" stereotype that culturally sensitive scholars might do well to question.

We might go further than that. We might consider philosopher Robert Solomon's provocative argument that the role of law is not to banish emotion, but to *satisfy* it in measured, even-handed ways. "Emotion," he writes "is not irrelevant to law, and any conception of law in purely dispassionate terms threatens to be inhuman" (Solomon 1999: 128). With that monition in mind, we might listen with our hearts as well as our heads to the Met's confident claim that we have passed the deadline for a claim to be "timely brought." We might entertain with a passionate ear attorney Tito Mazzetta's response to that dismissal. "The legal deadline for the restitution of the *biga* may have passed," he wrote in a 2006 statement. "But the deadlines of morality and justice never expire." *I termini morali e di giustizia non scadono mai.*

A Final Wrinkle

Early in the 20th century, many Monteleonesi emigrated to America as part of the New Immigration so repugnant to WASP restrictionists. Of these, a good number settled in or near Trenton, New Jersey, where they worked in heavy industry and construction—the bulk of them in the Roebling cable factory. So many of them lived in the area, in fact, that in 1907 they formed a Monteleone Society. By 1932, when the society held a banquet to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary, it boasted literally hundreds of active members. And these emigrants remained in touch with the mother

country. In fact, on the wall of Alfredo Ceccarelli's café in Monteleone is a faded photograph of that 1932 banquet.

Although the connections between the village and the village in diaspora remain strong, the American Monteleonesi definitely do not share their homeland's desire to see the *biga* return to Italy. Indeed, they are among the most vocal defenders of the Met's stewardship role. Those of them who are descended from Isidoro Vannozzi, moreover, are also intent on setting the record straight on his accomplishment. (Rich 2007). According to Trentonian Bill Giovanetti, Isidoro's great-grandson, whatever Deputy Barnabei may have said, his great-grandfather should not be faulted for selling his property; the Met is doing a great job of protecting the *biga*; and it ought to stay exactly where it is. Giovanetti and other opponents of Operazione Recupero Biga have even developed a website to protect the family's reputation and raise money for the chariot. If you fancy a lapel pin or a T shirt emblazoned with a stylized chariot logo, you can order them at www.thevannozzifamilymonteleonechariotfund.org.

At first glance, the opposition between the Trenton and Monteleone wings of the Vannozzi clan might seem intense. But there may be an opening here for dialogue. Nando Durastanti himself has suggested that the village would be open to something short of total repatriation—a time-share, perhaps, of the coveted artifact. The Met has given no sense of budging, but then the fight for the *biga* is still young, and there has been increased contact of late between Umbria and Trenton. Even Bill Giovanetti speaks of the people of Monteleone as “my family.”

So perhaps some intrafamilial “hands across the sea” initiative isn't out of the picture. Perhaps Tito Mazzetta's confidence might yet prove prophetic. After all, before the chariot was in New York for 100 years, it was buried in Umbrian soil for considerably longer.

And, as Nando Durastanti says with a puckish smile, “We are mountain people. We don't give up.”

References

I am grateful to Atlanta attorney Tito Mazzetta for sharing his correspondence with me; his letters to and from the Met are also archived on Monteleone's website: www.comune.monteleone-di-spoletto.pg.it/ I thank Giuseppina Venazzi for giving me a copy of Pro Loco's pamphlet and for her and her husband Pietro's graciousness to me and my wife during our 2007 visit. And to two members of the American Monteleonesi clan, Bob Innocenzi and Bill Giovanetti, my appreciation for a lively discussion not only of the *biga* but also of the considerable contributions made by their ancestors to the fortunes of the Roebling family fortune.

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