

Smithsonian Ethical Returns Working Group

Smithsonian Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Statement of Values and Principles

In response to the Secretary's strategic priorities "Our Shared Future" and "Trusted Source," the Smithsonian established the Ethical Returns Working Group in April 2021 to consider issues related to the shared stewardship and ethical return of Smithsonian collections. The purpose of the Working Group was to promote ethical and current best practices regarding the return of Smithsonian collections and other aspects of stewardship, namely in consideration of rights, custody, and access. As part of its activities, the Working Group developed this Values and Principles Statement which outlines the values we believe the Smithsonian should aspire to in its actions, policies, and practices.

The Statement reflects themes of inclusion, mutual respect, community engagement, and consultation; the acknowledgement of the lasting harm perpetrated by the collecting practices of the past; and the recognition of the need to implement new standards for ethical stewardship. The values and principles expressed below greatly informed the development of the Smithsonian's Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Policy and will assist Smithsonian collecting units in the revision of their policies and practices.

- **We believe that past acquisitions raising ethical concerns should be investigated and addressed in a manner consistent with current ethical standards.**

We value being proactive rather than simply responsive in addressing issues related to past collecting. We will work in partnership with individuals and communities, as well as with inter-governmental and regional stakeholders, regarding the care and potential return of human remains and/or objects of cultural heritage in Smithsonian collections, including sharing associated information, not only when legally required but when ethically obligated, advocating thoughtful engagement with communities and mutual knowledge-sharing and capacity building.

We recognize that there are human remains in Smithsonian collections that have been acquired without the consent of those individuals. Regardless of prior consent and whatever their context in place and time, we believe that all human remains must be treated with dignity and respect, as those once living, and not objectified as a scientific resource, and we are committed to the ethical return or shared stewardship of human remains whenever possible.

We recognize that there can be a difference between legal and ethical norms. For example, while an object may have been legally acquired, continued control by the Smithsonian may not be consistent with current ethical practice and principles.

We affirm the requirement that all Smithsonian collections and collections related information must be acquired ethically, scientifically, and legally. We also recognize that ethical norms and best practices at the Smithsonian and in the museum profession have changed over time. We must consider what this means for existing collections and adopt clear policies to support and assist Smithsonian collecting units in acting in an ethical and responsible manner regarding existing collections and any future acquisitions regardless of the date or circumstance of acquisition.

- **We believe that the best interactions with individuals and communities concerning past and future collecting are inclusive and mutually respectful.**

We will seek out and nurture relationships with communities, as well as inter-governmental and regional stakeholders, to enhance the free flow of information, engage in dialogue and consultation, and seek opportunities to share benefits.

We acknowledge that the Smithsonian has collected from individuals and communities in a manner that has caused harm or benefited from unequal power relationships. Such practices may be reflected in collections we hold today, but they must have no part in our future interactions and collecting.

- **We believe that the strongest organizations value and incorporate diverse knowledge, narratives, and perspectives.**

We acknowledge that collections can play a positive role in sharing and preserving stories, histories, and community heritage, but we must move beyond the idea that possession of physical objects is the only value of a museum's work. We recognize and embrace current best practices that facilitate equitable knowledge-sharing, shared stewardship, and ongoing collaboration with communities, as well as with inter-governmental and regional stakeholders.

We recognize the benefit of community representation in Smithsonian collections, the value of sharing less widely known or appreciated histories, and our role as collaborative custodians of cultural and historical legacies deserving honor and respect.

Through our actions, we seek to promote and participate in a new future with the communities whose histories and current lives are intertwined with Smithsonian collections, programs, and scholarship. We acknowledge that collections play a role in allowing communities to be represented and to represent themselves and in preserving and sharing histories across time.

- **We believe that the most informed and connected organizations are aware of and participate in national and international discussions and standards on topics relating to collections stewardship and all forms of scholarship.**

We will regularly examine our policies, practices, language, and terminology to demonstrate our commitment to the values of inclusivity, transparency, mutual respect, and ethical conduct as they evolve in our changing and globally interconnected cultures. We will engage in larger communities and discussions to stay current on these topics.

Based on these beliefs, we affirm the Smithsonian's commitment to implement policies that respond in a transparent and timely manner to requests for return or shared stewardship. We will galvanize a Smithsonian community of practice that respects and actively engages with various perspectives and affirms our commitment to a shared future regarding the ongoing stewardship of Smithsonian collections, as well as the opportunities to address the ethical return of human remains and objects of cultural heritage in the Smithsonian's care.