

- Announcer: Welcome to The Bill Walton Show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing. Interesting people, interesting things.
- Bill Walton: Welcome to another edition of The Bill Walton Show. Have you ever wondered when you visit one of our great art museums, how all the artwork got there? The stories about the journeys that art takes to end up in a museum can be as fascinating as the art itself. But some stories can be quite problematic. For example, the art stolen during Hitler's Holocaust and the African art taken from Africa by European colonists during the 19th century. In America and Europe, thousands of paintings and sculptures have troubled histories and were likely stolen during the Nazi era.
- Bill Walton: Then there are the growing demands for the restitution of artifacts to Africa. Most notably, French President, Macron, set off a firestorm in 2017 by announcing, "I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France. African heritage can no longer be the prisoner of European museums." Strong stuff.
- Bill Walton: With me to sort this out is CD Dickerson, who serves as curator and head of the Department of Sculptures and Decorative Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Incredibly prolific as a writer and lecturer, he's curated many major exhibitions, and I believe that CD is himself destined to lead one of the world's great art museums. CD, welcome.
- CD Dickerson: Thank you very much for the introduction.
- Bill Walton: Before we jump into our topic, tell me about your role at the gallery.
- CD Dickerson: I'm responsible for overseeing a collection that spans antiquities, gallery only has a handful of antiquities up to about 1920. All the decorative arts, sculpture produced in Europe and America between those two poles.
- CD Dickerson: In addition to curatorial responsibilities [inaudible] collection, one of my great pleasures is curating exhibitions. And this coming fall is one of the high points of my career. We have-
- Bill Walton: Are these books from your upcoming exhibition?
- CD Dickerson: Exactly. These are hot off the press, just shipped across the ocean for one book that I just finished writing on a Spanish sculptor. That will be the centerpiece of the exhibition opening on October 13th here in Washington. This was the transformative sculptor of the early 16th century in Spain. A guy who worked with Michelangelo and then went back to Spain.
- Bill Walton: So you're making, you pronounced this name, Alonzo Berruguete.

- CD Dickerson: Perfect. Alonzo Berruguete.
- Bill Walton: Berruguete, okay.
- CD Dickerson: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And at the same time we will have Alonzo Berruguete, not a household name. More of a household name is Verrocchio whose star pupil was Leonardo da Vinci. And we will be having the first monographic exhibition devoted to Verrocchio that will be open at the same time, painter, sculptor, and a phenomenal draftsman. So come to Washington. Come see this.
- Bill Walton: When you're curating, we're talking about how art ends up in a museum, and the circuitous path it can take from time to time, almost always. What goes into curating an exhibition? Do you have to pull art from all over the world and work out arrangements with other galleries and galleries?
- CD Dickerson: Absolutely. A lot of it is diplomacy, it's negotiations, it's leveraging the gallery zone collections to be able to secure masterpieces from Bargello, Vatican, the Louvre, major institutions, creating a theme, and then realizing all of these objects safely to Washington.
- Bill Walton: And part of your role in doing that is to make sure that each object is in the legitimate hands of ... legitimately owned by whoever's lending it.
- CD Dickerson: Yes, exactly. And one thing that we work out with the US government is called immunity from seizure, so that when a work of art comes to the US, if there are any claims brought by that work in the US, that there's immunity from seizure, that it can safely go back to its home country.
- Bill Walton: Now you have some objects in your collection. I think we have a chalice that has an interesting provenance.
- CD Dickerson: Yeah. The interesting thing is that when the average visitor goes through a museum collection, many times there will be that credit line that says the last owner, the person who gave the work to the institution. But there's much, much deeper stories many times with-
- Bill Walton: Do you have a picture of it-
- CD Dickerson: ... respect to works of art.
- Bill Walton: Let's take a look.
- CD Dickerson: This is the chalice of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis. Saint-Denis is a church that's just North of Paris. Abbot Suger was kind of the leading religious figure in France during the 12th century, served as the nominal king during periods when the king was unable to occupy power. This is a work that at its core is a sardonyx, a

type of hard stone that was likely carved in Egypt during the 1st century BC. But at some point over the next 10 centuries, it made its way perhaps through traders up to Paris, got in the hands of Abbott Suger who then commissioned the leading-

Bill Walton: So how many hands would an object like this pass through in the course of its thousand years of existence?

CD Dickerson: One never knows. I mean, in terms of rightful ownership, this probably transferred 20, 30 times.

Bill Walton: 20, okay.

CD Dickerson: Yeah. One never knows. But we do know from the moment that it entered into Abbott Suger's possession, it's fully documented in the treasury of Saint-Denis up until 1791 in the brink of the French civil war. At that point the Abbot was suppressed and all of the remains from the treasury were moved to Paris to the Cabinet des Médailles. At that point this was supposed to be safe repository for the objects, but with the chaos of the Napoleonic Wars we know that at a certain point, it was spirited out of France, made its way to the UK where it was bought by a collector in the early 19th century. Eventually it traded-

Bill Walton: Spirited out means stolen.

CD Dickerson: That seems to be the case. But there's documentary reports-

Bill Walton: So made its way to London.

CD Dickerson: Made its way to London, but then was sold into a prominent private collection and eventually was sold to the Wideners of Philadelphia in the early part of the 20th century and have since been fully documented, fully transparent knowledge of this work. No claims have been made for it. It's gone back to France. But it's a fascinating story of ...

Bill Walton: In a much more mundane world, you think of that deed, the title insurer for your house and how you have to go through all the previous owners to make sure it was legitimately passed from one hand to the next. If you think of the 4,000 objects you have in your exhibition or in your department, I mean the number of hands that it's gone through have got to be incredible.

CD Dickerson: Absolutely, absolutely. But the documentary trail many times is very scarce and there are gaps in the provenance. The provenance is the trail of ownership. And we are very, very particular about trying to trace as an excruciating detail each ownership step as best we can. But at a certain point, the trail peters out, or there will be gaps in the ownership.

Bill Walton: Well, there's some ... You pointed out some ... We're talking earlier about some great stories. The four horses on top of Saint Mark's in Venice.

CD Dickerson: Right. I mean this is just to make the point that-

Bill Walton: Do we have the picture that?

CD Dickerson: That things that we completely take for granted have problematic ownership histories. These were bronze horses. In this photograph, these are reproductions. The originals are inside the museum of San Marco in Venice.

Bill Walton: And they stand above the arch. That's the archway entrance to the church.

CD Dickerson: Exactly. Exactly. But these were bronze horses that were created during Roman times, eventually made their way to Constantinople. They seem to have been on top of the main circus in Constantinople. And in 1204 Venetians took them, spolia that they brought back and very proudly mounted on top of St Mark. But in essence they constitute war loot. And this is a story that's been going on for centuries and centuries and centuries. I mean, the earliest documented incidents probably involves this great stelee that's at-

Bill Walton: Stelee is what, a ...

CD Dickerson: A large relief, a commemorative relief that takes ...

Bill Walton: So it's a flat work of a sculpture?

CD Dickerson: Exactly. This one is about five feet tall, executed in very shallow relief. It's executed in Mesopotamia in probably around 2000 BCE, Tigris-Euphrates, the Acadian people. It commemorates a victory of the king who stands very proudly larger than his soldiers at the top of a mountain. And it shows, even a fleeing soldier here turning back and trying to appeal for mercy to the king. And there's an inscription that says exactly that this is commemorating a victory.

CD Dickerson: But this was not found in Mesopotamia. Point in fact, it was found in modern day Iran in 1898 or so by French archeologists. And there's another inscription that was added to it that shows that in fact this was stolen in the year 1200 BC by a rival king who took it as victory spoils and was very proud of the fact that he was able to take this great commemorative plaque back to his-

Bill Walton: So he carved his initials on the, yeah.

CD Dickerson: Pretty much exactly, exactly. But it's just to show this kind of stuff is going on forever. So where would you repatriate this? If it somehow illegally got out of Iran, would you repatriate it to Babylonia to Iraq or would you give it back to Iran where it was found in the source country?

Bill Walton: Well, yeah, that's also one of the issues with ... We're going to get into this in the next segment, but with repatriating art back to Africa, very often the repatriating to a country or a culture.

CD Dickerson: Exactly.

Bill Walton: And they're not always, and usually are not the same thing.

CD Dickerson: Nope.

Bill Walton: You're watching The Bill Walton Show. I'm here with CD Dickerson, head of the Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department at National Gallery of Art, and we're talking about the interesting history that art objects have that have come into our great museums and how that bringing it up to date about how we're going to be dealing with African art that's been taken by the colonialists and also the Holocaust art or era art that was sometimes in the wrong hands now.

Bill Walton: Let's turn a bit to where we ... Before we get to the Holocaust and the African art, let's talk about the Elgin marbles. That's pretty interesting.

CD Dickerson: Sure.

Bill Walton: Because that's also another case where art was in one country and it's currently contested now between I guess Britain and Greece.

CD Dickerson: Right. I mean this is the classic case of what do you do with the art that is no longer in its source country and seems to have had controversial circumstances of removal. Between about 1801 and 1806 Lord Elgin, he was the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and stationed in Athens at that point in time. Claims to have received authorization from the Sultan to begin to take down and remove the reliefs that decorated the Parthenon. The Parthenon, the great structure that was commissioned by the Athenian Assembly about 448 BC. It is kind of the centerpiece, the symbol of Athenian greatness, when democracy, when the real need to philosophical discussions about individual rights was born. And this is the great artistic expression at that moment.

Bill Walton: In Athens, on the Acropolis.

CD Dickerson: Exactly.

Bill Walton: The Parthenon was the temple.

CD Dickerson: Right.

Bill Walton: And these objects decorated that temple.

- CD Dickerson: Right. There's a series that decorates the interior frieze of the Parthenon that was removed. And also, beautiful sculptures that come from the eastern west pediment, the triangular space above the main portico.
- Bill Walton: But there is a story about how these came to be more portable than they otherwise would have been. I think the Turks were storing their ammunition or their explosives inside the Parthenon.
- CD Dickerson: Right.
- Bill Walton: And they were fighting with the Greeks. Is that right?
- CD Dickerson: Right. Well, there was an earlier story in the 1690s I believe, much earlier, that the Turks were using this as an arsenal and a storage for gunpowder and whatnot. And the Venetians were attacking and blew the roof literally off of the Parthenon.
- Bill Walton: So the Venetians, we've talked about the Venetians stealing the horses from Constantinople. Now the Venetians are firing at the Turks at the Parthenon and they blow it up.
- CD Dickerson: Right. Right. So there was damage. There are drawings that survived from the time that show the incomplete state of what Lord Elgin was taking from the Parthenon. But, the fact of matter is, these are absolutely, exquisitely beautiful sculptures.
- Bill Walton: So let's get into our topic more deeply. What's the case for restitution? If you're the Greeks, what are the claims you're making? Send us back these marbles from London.
- CD Dickerson: The claim is that Lord Elgin did not have authorization to take this. So there wasn't legal change of title.
- Bill Walton: Yeah.
- CD Dickerson: Then rest on moral imperatives that you have the standing, surviving Parthenon. Half of the sculptures do survive in Athens. The case was being made that Athens had no place to properly display the sculptures.
- Bill Walton: Athens has a museum where they have part of the marbles already there.
- CD Dickerson: Exactly, exactly.
- Bill Walton: And they have, like they have space available for the ones in London.

CD Dickerson: Right. So the new galleries, which you see here on the left, just recently opened, well, recent, 2009. So for decades and decades, the case was gauged we're doing the Greeks a favor by preserving the marbles in British Museum at Bloomsbury Square. But, that case is now eroded because you have beautiful gallery space with these beautiful-

Bill Walton: Bloomsbury Square is where the museum is.

CD Dickerson: Exactly. Looking up to the Parthenon so that you would be able to display the marbles within a beautiful context of their original location, which is unique.

Bill Walton: But let me ask a practical question. Museums are expensive and it's easy to cut the budget of museum. If you're a government, then you've got other things you have to do. Greece is broke. So if we bring them back to Greece, what's to assure us that these objects will stay protected?

CD Dickerson: I'm not sure you can have an assurance other than trust in another country and demonstration of what they have done here and a recognition that there is global interest in ensuring the wellbeing of these artifacts.

Bill Walton: Well, and it gets right into this notion about where does culture reside and why should the British Museum be the place where universally own for the whole world to see. So it's a very 19th century British Empire view of the world. That's where they ought to be. And it really brings us back to the idea of colonization and where this should be.

Bill Walton: Now, the other side of it is that if they return these marbles, it's going to set a precedent for all the other museums.

CD Dickerson: Right. So that's the big slippery slope argument, that once you begin to return objects to their source country, where do you stop? And eventually you get to a world where the museums of every country are only showing the art of that country, which is obviously something we don't want. You don't want to go to the National Gallery of Art and just see American paintings that were ...

Bill Walton: Well, you'd have to break it into an Alabama exhibit and an Indiana, if we really wanted to Balkanize it. Well that's ... The culture versus country issue comes up here though, because one of the arguments is that the Greeks that made this 400 BC roughly are not the same Greeks that are there now. That's been a massive change in culture and country and that sort of thing. So to whom are you repatriating in this? Are those really the rightful heir?

CD Dickerson: Right, right. And whether or not nationalist agendas are coming into play in terms of the Greeks and people wanting to try to rescue cultural patronage for political motives.

- Bill Walton: I'm going to put you on the spot. What do you think ought to happen with the Elgin marbles?
- CD Dickerson: I'm sympathetic to the fact that they, part of them can be seen in the original context and part of them are in the British Museum. The British Museum-
- Bill Walton: So we get to see them in both ways.
- CD Dickerson: The British Museum is beginning a policy more of exhibiting them worldwide. They're about to travel to Russia. So the more people who are able to see these and to diversify locations, I think has a bonus and a plus.
- Bill Walton: Okay. That was sort of an answer.
- CD Dickerson: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But it's difficult because it cuts to the essence of where encyclopedic museums are going to be going in the 21st century and encyclopedic museum ...
- Bill Walton: An encyclopedia museum is ...
- CD Dickerson: Encyclopedic are universal museum, meaning a museum that tries to display the art and the heritage of all cultures across time. So that at one moment you can be looking at an altar piece produced in Italy from circa 1500 and you can make a short walk and see what was happening in China at the same moment in time. And there's obviously real benefits to being able to look at world culture globally and trying to understand how people-
- Bill Walton: Oh, it is one of the big benefits. In one place you can see cultures across time.
- CD Dickerson: Exactly. And-
- Bill Walton: How many encyclopedic museums are there around the world, roughly?
- CD Dickerson: You think of the big encyclopedic museums like the Louvre, The Metropolitan, but even the museum that I worked at, the Kimbell could be considered an encyclopedic museum because there was a small collection of African, Asian, and Mesoamerican art as well.
- Bill Walton: You're watching the ... I want to jump into this because I want to take a quick break. You're watching The Bill Walton Show. I'm here with CD Dickerson, head of Sculpture and Decorative Arts with the National Gallery of Art. And we're talking about the issues of where art should reside, whether it should reside where it's originally created or in one of the encyclopedic museums. And there are no simple answers to this. But we're going to dig a little further.

- Bill Walton: I want to turn our attention to the Nazi art, to the not Nazi art but the art that was stolen during the Nazi era and what the issues are there.
- CD Dickerson: Sure. Well, as is widely known, the Nazis during World War II forcibly stole works of art from Jews, as well as purchased art under duress at below market values that then inhabited Hitler's collection. And it was a great robbing of art throughout Europe. Immediately after the war there was an ability, especially on the part of a group of Americans known as the Monuments Men, who were able to repatriate as far as they were able to-
- Bill Walton: That was the subject of a movie, wasn't it?
- CD Dickerson: Yes, exactly. The Rape of Europa, Robert Edsel, there are a number of fantastic books he's written about the subject.
- Bill Walton: Yes.
- CD Dickerson: But it's really only been since the curtain has fall with the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s that the kind of documentation that's required to be able to find claimants and to be able to prove ownership is coming to light. So it's really been the 1990s, early 21st century that this has really come to the fore and really culminated probably in 1998 with what's called the Washington Principles, which was organized by the State Department and it was ...
- Bill Walton: That was Stuart Eizenstat that was doing that?
- CD Dickerson: Exactly. And really reaching agreement by multiple nations that they would look at the collections within their countries and try to come to an understanding of really what was happening with the problematic ownership during the Nazi era.
- Bill Walton: Well, the thing that struck me when I read this is the biggest single issue is number one, is identify.
- CD Dickerson: Exactly.
- Bill Walton: What you've got. And there are 25 million works of art in American museums roughly. And we think maybe 25,000 or 30,000 of them might be ...
- CD Dickerson: Yeah, that they have little gaps between whatever 1933 up to 1945.
- Bill Walton: So a little gap, 1933 to 1945. Okay, that's suggestive. But for the individual museum who's part of this or the individual country that's part of it, it's a massive undertaking to go through every single object and see whether it's got good title.

CD Dickerson: Exactly. And museums, National Gallery of Art has been at the forefront of the science and it's got a forensic science of examining the kind of documentation that survives, especially in Eastern Germany that has come to light, to be able to try to piece ownership back together. And then, you also have the problem that you're dealing now at this point with the heirs of the original owners. And they aren't really certain what their grandparents or their parents might've owned as they were children. So the process of who has the responsibility for trying to notify and to try to bring to light what's going on.

CD Dickerson: But it's really just about transparency, about putting these objects that are problematic on the web in hopes that people will recognize and realize that they might have a claim to a particular work of art.

Bill Walton: It seems to be losing steam though, doesn't it? We're almost 80, almost 90 years since Hitler came into power, and since World War II, as you pointed out, the descendants of the original owners or second generation, third generation, this whole initiative seems to be petering out.

CD Dickerson: I don't know if the initiative is petering out or whether there are enough sufficient claims out there to continue forward. There's a lot of things that seem to be caught up in the courts, and I'm by no means an international law specialist, but there's ... There was a particularly interesting case that I was reading about that involves Baron Herzog of Hungary. He had a fabulous collection. Here's an illustration-

Bill Walton: We have a picture of his library, right?

CD Dickerson: Of the collection that shows these fabulous works by El Greco. One of the seminal Old Master collections in private hands before the war completely confiscated by Hungary, occupies the ... was sold to the Nazis, pushing up what was given back to the family, but immediately the Hungarians took it and put it in the Budapest National Museum, the Hungarian National Museum.

CD Dickerson: When the Iron Curtain was erected, the heirs had no means to be able to try to recoup or to press claims in any sort of court of law in Hungary. So it's been up to the heirs in 2010 trying to press their claims through US courts. And US courts actually ruled in this particular case that the statute of limitations doesn't necessarily apply, that the clock stopped when the Iron Curtain was erected, which has given them an opening.

CD Dickerson: The problem has to do though with the way in which a US court can prosecute a case on a foreign sovereign because there's the Foreign Sovereign Immunity Act, which says that a sovereign nation can seize the property of its citizens without the US court being able to intervene. The only way we can intervene is that it's an international claim. And here it's saying that if there's economic damage that was done in relation to the genocide, that that in fact is a violation of international laws.

CD Dickerson: The international court in US has ruled that the paintings need to go back. Needless to say that Hungary has appealed. But this is showing that there remains a lot of tension in those formerly East Bloc countries with the repatriation of these claims.

Bill Walton: Well, Russia in particular is known as one of the leading repositories of Russian or all art, stolen art.

CD Dickerson: Absolutely.

Bill Walton: And they're not doing anything to repatriate or return.

CD Dickerson: No. But there is a little bit of a thaw and actually a little bit of the thaw will play out in Washington with respect to this exhibition because there is works that were taken from Berlin during World War II that are now known to occupy Russia. And we had a Russian curator and a curator in Berlin write a co-entry and we're going to have a plastic cast of one of the works that's being debated that Russia has ... took.

Bill Walton: Well, it does flow both ways, so I understand. And Angela Merkel was going to go to Russia for an opening of a museum and her speech was going to be, "Well I'm here in Russia, and I'd like to ask the Russians to return all the art they stole from Germany at the end of World War II."

CD Dickerson: Right, and it was preempted, the speech.

Bill Walton: They canceled the speech.

CD Dickerson: Yes.

Bill Walton: And then Italy has absolutely refused to do anything. And it's ...

CD Dickerson: But in the US, it has been working, and there are great cases, even at the Kimbell for instance, which is one that I know well, where two Jews who were residing in Nice had their collection-

Bill Walton: This is a William Turner we're looking at here?

CD Dickerson: Exactly, this part of the Kimbell's collection that was bought and part of the collection for many decades. But in 2006 the claim was brought against it and the Kimbell agreed to return the work to the heirs of the original owners. The original owners put it up for auction and the Kimbell promptly repurchased the work. So it remains in the collection, which is a nice ...

Bill Walton: Okay. So we agreed it was yours, but then you're going to agree to sell it back to us.

CD Dickerson: Yes, yes.

Bill Walton: And then we pay for it.

CD Dickerson: Right. Right.

Bill Walton: Well, that's one. Did you handle that?

CD Dickerson: No, I didn't. That was before my time at the Kimbell.

Bill Walton: Still it was the Kimbell and you were there. So that's ... So how much of the art looted during World War II has been returned? Is it like 1%, 10%? We don't know?

CD Dickerson: You know, I've read figures. It maybe 30 or 40 works.

Bill Walton: Okay.

CD Dickerson: The US have ...

Bill Walton: 30 or 40 works.

CD Dickerson: From the US had been restituted. I'm not sure about the numbers in Europe because again there are a number of trials and cases that are playing out. I think the two examples from the National Gallery of works that have been restituted, a drawing and a 17th century painting by Frans Snyders. But still, and it's not huge floodgates of works of art going back.

Bill Walton: Well, it's an interesting, but I think it's an arcane issue and hard for people to understand and it involves plenty of lawyers and lots of litigation and lots of legal fees. And so there's the ... There's a lot.

CD Dickerson: And a lot of time on the part of curator. We have a dedicated person researching the Nazi era provenance at the gallery, just to make sure every work of art is clean of health.

Bill Walton: Regrettably, that's all the time we have. Thank you CD Dickerson for your insights about art and restoration or restitution.

Bill Walton: Now, I'd like to announce that we are going to continue with CD in overtime because we haven't had a chance to dig into I think one of the most interesting topics, which is the return of African art, African objects from European museums back to Africa. So hope you'll join me then. Thank you.

Announcer: Thanks for listening. Want more? Be sure to subscribe at thebillwaltonshow.com or on iTunes.

This transcript was exported on Dec 12, 2019 - view latest version [here](#).