

The Midwest Faculty Seminar  
presents

## **Who Owns Culture?**

April 15-17, 2010

Changing social and technological practices have forced a reevaluation of ownership, fair use, and appropriation of artistic and cultural endeavors. The rise of the Internet and digital reproduction grant the average consumer unprecedented access to files and objects that are, essentially, pirated. Notions of copyright and intellectual property are intensely disputed, with the place of governments in policing these violations held to be especially controversial. This naturally gives rise to further questions, not only about the degree to which protective measures should be oriented towards punitive discipline or towards prevention, but also about the practical aspects of enforcement: how can intellectual property rights be enforced within the geographically dispersed culture of the internet? How do such questions impact notions of authorship, affect journalistic or academic practice, or change the administration of cultural archives? Which intellectual appropriations should be morally, legally or commercially permitted? Does the transfer of cultural ideas enrich cultural production and facilitate entry into the global cultural discourse by minorities and the culturally disempowered, or does it minimize regional uniqueness and allow further hegemonic domination of the elite cultural owners? What are the possibilities and pitfalls of extending the logic of ownership to the art, music, rituals, stories, folklore or traditional knowledge of any cultural tradition?

These sorts of debates are not, however, limited to the digital or intellectual spheres. Disputes over the ownership of physical artifacts have intensified during roughly the same period as conflicts over electronic property have grown. Of course, beginning at a much earlier date, Greece, Iran and Egypt demanded the repatriation of objects that had been unearthed and removed from their soil long ago, and that now reside in prestigious cultural institutions of other nations. The Military actions in the Middle East in the last decade that resulted in the looting and destruction of antiquities make such questions of responsibility for restitution and the need for protection of such antiquities all the more pressing. Such contested artifacts, which are immeasurably important for historical research and, in some cases, for understanding the very foundations of civilizations, are equally important for the national histories and cultural identity of their originating countries. What functions do physical artifacts serve in constituting a cultural identity? How can ownership of such treasures be decided, and who should be entitled to make these decisions? Do considerations such as political stability and capacity for preservation take precedence over national origins?

Through these and other related issues, this seminar aims to examine the stakes of debates over cultural property. When one asks about the ownership of a cultural object – whether digital, artifactual or intellectual – what related issues are also under discussion and what complexities are lingering under the surface of such a question? Speakers for this seminar include Adrian Johns (History of Science), Lawrence Rothfield (English) and Matthew Stolper (Assyriology, Oriental Institute).