



December 19, 2018

The Honorable Emmanuel Macron
President of the French Republic
The Elysee Palace
55, Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré
75008 Paris, France

Dear President Macron,

The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) applauds France's decision to return 26 Dahomeyan cultural objects from the Quai Branly Museum to Benin, items that were looted from that part of Africa in 1892. While the issue of international repatriation of objects of cultural patrimony held by museums is a complex one, it is imperative that France also take immediate steps to stop the commercialization of such items by curbing the sales of indigenous antiquities, objects of cultural patrimony, and sacred items at private auctions.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,000 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

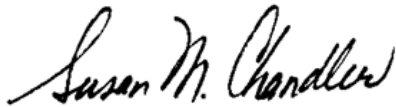
In recent years, SAA has unsuccessfully objected to the auctioning of Native American sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony at proceedings hosted by the French auction houses Druot and EVE. The reasons for opposing those auctions still stand today. The 19th and first half of the 20th centuries—the period of origin for some of the items that were sold—was a time of extreme poverty for Native Americans. It is possible that sales at that time to collectors were made under duress. Furthermore, tribal members did not have the right of title under Western legal systems to allow them to individually possess, sell, or otherwise divest such items from tribal ownership. The legal requirement of good title is recognized in France, and some of these items do not possess such standing.

SAA has long stood against the buying and selling of objects out of archaeological context. As noted in our Principles of Archaeological Ethics, commercialization “...is contributing to the destruction of the archaeological record on the American continents and around the world. The commercialization of archaeological objects - their use as commodities to be exploited for personal enjoyment or profit - results in the destruction of archaeological sites and of contextual information that is essential to understanding the archaeological record.” Worse, these sales result in the scattering of the items to potential buyers around the world, which further degrades the irreplaceable information and context that they possess.

In addition, France was one of the first signatories to the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 12 of the Declaration states, in part, that “*Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies;*” and “*the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects.*” By continuing the status of these objects as commodities to be traded, the auctions thus deprive the affected tribes of their rights under international law and agreement.

For the above reasons, SAA respectfully urges the French government to enact measures to end the auctioning of indigenous antiquities, objects of cultural patrimony, and sacred items.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan M. Chandler". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Susan M. Chandler, RPA
President