

*Who Owns Heritage*  
[Slide 1]  
Kwame Anthony Appiah

I assume that all of you, like me, love art museums: otherwise you wouldn't be in the heritage business. Here, I suggest, is one reason why. They allow us both to learn about traditions we identify with—our own arts, so to speak—and to explore the arts and culture of others. I love visiting the museums in Kumasi, [Slide 2 Kumasi] the town where I grew up, which are largely, in some sense, about us, the people of Asante, whose capital Kumasi is, [Slide 3 Ghana Cultural Center] and contain some of the magnificent things we have made. [Slide 4—this is the gold-leaved head of an Asante linguist's stick]

But I have taken great pleasure as well in the experience of going to the great museums on the Museuminsel in Berlin [Slide 5 Museum Insel Berlin] and around Trafalgar Square in London [Slide 6 National Gallery London]; or to the MOMA and the Met [Slide 7 the Met] and the Louvre [Slide 8—Palais du Louvre], or the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna [Slide 9 Wiener Museum] (as I first saw it when I was young). I am enjoying the chance to visit Swedish cultural heritage sites this week.

All of these are places where I can appreciate and learn about and bask in the beauty or the power of the arts of civilizations with which I don't have that kind of connection of a local identity. Here, somewhat at random, are what Mary Poppins might have called a “few of my favorite things.” In New York, the Egyptian Temple of Dendur [Slide 10]; in Vienna, Giorgione's Venetian *Three Philosophers* [Slide 11]; in Berlin, the Greek Pergamon Altar in Berlin [Slide 12.]

Because one of the key things about these great museums is that they allow us to take pleasure in cultures with which we don't have the connection of identity; they permit us to engage with cultures to which our connection is just our connection as human beings. I like to think of the museum as a place in which you can see, say, a Chinese artifact, [Slide 13 Ming Vase] not being Chinese yourself, and think of it as, for the moment, yours; transcending the normal divisions of identity that play such a large role in the way people currently think about the arts and about culture. (This one is also in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York; as is, by the way, that Akan linguist's stick I showed you earlier.) And, oh, here's one more, which happens to be in the collection of New York's MOMA, which is close to where I live! [Slide 13—Diego Rivera]

Now I want to be clear at the start that I am no expert on art or on museums. But I want to share with you some thoughts about the ways in which issues of identity are evoked whenever we approach the arts. And on that topic I am, like anyone who ever goes to a museum, an expert!

After all, I have often found myself looking for an African presence in the museums I mentioned and in others: some years ago, in Sao Paulo, for example, I found myself in an Afro-Brazilian Museum [Slide 14] with its eerie evocation of the slave-ships that brought Africa to Brazil [Slide 15]. My presence there had something to do with my own African origins, no doubt ... though the Brazilians who recommended it to me clearly think of it as a great reflection of *their* national identity and its deep interconnections with the African cultures from which so many of their ancestors came. It was mine as an African, theirs as Brazilians. And I could enjoy it in good measure, of course, because, since I am not Brazilian, it was teaching me about worlds I did not know.

Today I'd like to explore briefly with you some of the difficulties that we now have in our thinking about culture and identity that go back—or so I'm going to argue—to theories that developed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe and North America, about the time the modern idea of the museum was itself taking off. I want to say a little bit about some of those ideas and what I think is good and bad in them and what, in particular, I think we have lost in some of recent ways of framing the issue.

That we are in a bit of a muddle today is less surprising when you remember that our

ideas come out of an intellectual history that is full of conflict and contest. Some of our ideas—about the value of science and reason and the importance of truth; about the centrality of beauty and sublimity in aesthetic experience; about the importance of human dignity and human rights and of toleration in politics—come from the Enlightenment. But many of our ideas about culture and politics come from a cultural movement entwined with the later Enlightenment, but in contest with some of its ideas, namely, Romanticism. And the argument between Enlightenment and Romantic ideas is still with us.

The idea of the artistic genius, which is part of the way many of us nowadays respond to the arts, whether we think it's a sensible way or not, certainly comes from Romanticism. So does the idea that emotion rather than reason is the key to our response to the arts. Less often noticed, though, is a new set of ideas about identity, and about national identity in particular, which are elements of romanticism, too; where a connection is made between the nation, on the one hand, and artistic genius, on the other. Indeed, the modern ideas of the artistic genius and of national genius grow together. The individual genius is an expression of the genius of his or her nation.

For the great German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder [Slide of Herder 17]—who's the godfather in many ways of German Romanticism and of the so-called Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) the movement that created the literature in which modern German culture finds its origins—the German nation is not essentially a political institution, it's not defined by geography, it's not a group defined biologically by shared descent: it's essentially a spiritual thing. A nation is defined by its Geist, its spirit. The Geist of a nation, the Volksgeist, is the core meaning of the nation and the Geist of the nation is found most profoundly expressed in the national language and in the arts, in culture. And so the genius of Goethe and Hölderlin, for example, but also the genius of the common folk whose stories the Brothers Grimm collected as expressions of German folk culture, all of these are expressions of the national spirit; a spirit which in the case of the literary arts is not just a Volksgeist, but a Sprachgeist, a spirit embedded not just in the nation's intellectual life but more particularly in its language.

For the modern romantic nationalists, this is what a nation really is: the embodiment and expression of a Geist, something spiritual, intellectual, mental. That's why nations matter, and that's why individual creativity matters: because individual creativity is the means through which the national creativity is expressed.

Nobody believes that now, you say? So why did the Guggenheim have a show a decade ago about Spanish art from El Greco (yup, that means “the Greek”) to Picasso (who lived most of his life in France)? Perhaps you didn't see the catalog or the show. [Slide 18 of Museum Website] But before you see the catalog, aren't you likely to think, “Well, of course. Great Spanish art. Expression of the soul of Spain—the soul that we also hear in flamenco, and see in the bullfight. The soul Hemmingway resonated with. Macho, responding to the bright colors of the Mediterranean sun...” Stop me now. I could go on like this for a while. But I don't have to: the Guggenheim itself talks about “radical juxtapositions that cut across time to reveal the overwhelming coherence of the Spanish tradition.” [Slide 19 of Guggenheim quote] We're familiar with this sort of talk. So, let me ask you to focus on why a late sixteenth-early seventeenth century painter called *Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος*, a man from Crete trained in Venice, who was *known* as “the Greek,” should be thought to be an embodiment of something essentially Spanish. [Slide 20—El Greco] I'm teasing the curators of this show not because they've made what I think is a mistake here; I'm teasing them because though it *is* a mistake, it's one that tempts most of us when we start thinking about art. My claim is that to understand why we find it so natural to think like this, we have to go back to romantics like Herder.

Now I've made it sound so far as though Herder and his Romantic friends thought that all that mattered about art was its contribution to the nation. So, you might think I'm going to assign to them the responsibility not just for the theory that all art is national—which I do—but also for the idea that we should focus only on art that is from our own nation. But that is far from the truth.

Because at the very same moment, and alongside this way of understanding art and culture as the expression of the national spirit, at the very same time is developed modern cosmopolitanism. Take, for example, George Gordon, Lord Byron [Slide 21 of Byron] one of the geniuses of romanticism: he died fighting for the freedom of the Greeks from Ottoman domination. Some of you will recall his verse about his adopted home:

The isles of Greece! the isles of Greece!  
 Where burning Sappho loved and sung,  
 Where grew the arts of war and peace,—  
 Where Delos rose and Phoebus sprung!  
 Eternal summer gilds them yet,  
 But all, except their sun, is set.

But Lord Byron wasn't a Greek: he was a Scot. And the poetry of Sappho mattered to him not because he was Greek, like Sappho, but because it was great poetry. Expressive, it is true, of the Attic genius, but speaking to anyone who could understand the words and had ever felt the slightest twinge of romantic emotion.

The point is that Romantics like Byron, like Herder, not only celebrated their own *Volksgeist*, they also celebrated the spirits of other Folks. Herder's nationalism, in short, is deeply cosmopolitan. And the very idea of cosmopolitan nationalism, which strikes the modern ear as a contradiction in terms, is crucial to understanding what's good about this tradition I think. And that of course is the thought that even if you think of art as the product of nations rather than of individuals, you also value the art that's produced by nations other than your own. Herder and Byron shared the sentiment that I said that I feel in the great cosmopolitan museums, which is: Here I am responding to these objects, which are mine as human ... not as Ghanaian or American or or whatever.

That excitement about the variety of human cultural artifacts is one of the two key elements of the tradition of cosmopolitanism, which stretches back to the Cynics of the fourth century BC, who first coined the expression *cosmou politês*, "citizen of the world." Cosmopolitanism starts with that metaphor of universal citizenship. "We are members one of another," as St. Paul says. [Ephesians 4:25] But a second, equally important, element, offers a sort of commentary on what it takes to be a moral community. Because cosmopolitans think that we can accept responsibility for one another while still living very different lives. In fact, cosmopolitans revel in the range and variety of the ways people live and the things they make and do. And so, unlike many people who think of the world as a moral community, cosmopolitans don't want to change everyone else to fit our own mold. We—I might as well admit that I count myself among the cosmopolitans—we are interested in human social, cultural, and individual variety.

So you might suppose that cosmopolitans should side with those who are busy around the world "preserving culture," resisting "cultural imperialism," salvaging "cultural patrimony." But behind these slogans you often find some curious assumptions. Take "preserving culture." It's one thing to provide people with help to sustain arts they want to sustain. Long live the Ghana National Cultural Center in Kumasi (whose entrance I showed you earlier), where you can go and learn traditional Akan dancing and drumming, especially since its classes are spirited and overflowing. Restore the deteriorating film stock of early Hollywood movies; continue the preservation of Old Norse and early Chinese and Ethiopian manuscripts; record, transcribe, and analyze the oral traditions of Malay and Maasai and Maori: all these are a valuable part of our human heritage.

But preserving *culture*—in the sense of cultural artifacts, broadly conceived—is different from preserving *cultures*. And the preservationists of cultures often pursue the latter, trying to ensure that the Huli of Papua New Guinea keep their "authentic" ways. [Slide 22] What makes a

cultural expression authentic, though? Are we to stop the importation of baseball caps into Vietnam, so that the Zao will continue with their colorful red headdresses? [Slide 23] Why not ask the Zao? Shouldn't the choice be theirs?

"They *have* no real choice," the cultural preservationists say. "We have dumped cheap Western clothes into their markets; and they can no longer afford the silk they used to wear. If they had what they really wanted, they'd still be dressed traditionally." But this is no longer an argument about authenticity. The claim is that they can't afford to do something that they'd really like to do, something that is expressive of an identity they care about and want to sustain. This is a genuine problem, one that afflicts people in many communities: they're too poor to live the life they want to lead. If that's true, it's an argument for trying to see whether we can alleviate their poverty. But if they do get richer and they still run around in T-shirts, that is their choice. Talk of authenticity now just amounts to telling other people what they ought to value in their own traditions. [Slide 24—Blank]

That's one of the intellectual risks that come with the idea of the Volksgeist. Once you think of the Volk as having a spiritual core, you can be tempted by the thought that people ought to be faithful to the Geist they belong to. That way lies what we often now call "essentialism," the practice of treating people of some identity as having some core set of norms they ought to live up to. If all great art made by Germans expresses the German genius—indeed if that's one of the criteria for great German art—then art that's un-German can't be great, unless, of course, it's made by someone un-German.

In the real world, we don't often have to tell people that they ought to wear the authentic dress of their Folk. People who can afford it mostly *like* to put on traditional garb—at least, from time to time. I was best man once at a Scottish wedding where the bridegroom wore a kilt and I wore kente cloth. [Slide 25] Andrew Oransay, the Scottish piper who led us up the aisle with his bagpipes, whispered in my ear at one point, "Here we all are then, in our tribal gear." In Kumasi, people who can afford them love to put on their kente, especially the most "traditional" ones, woven in colorful silk strips in the town of Bonwire, as they have been for a couple of centuries. [Slide 26] One reason we don't often have to tell people to wear the dress of the Folk is because the romantic nationalist ideology has traveled all around the planet. There are many languages that have taken up with the idea of "our culture." And if you want evidence that it's something new: here's one piece of evidence. There are lots of languages, like my father's, in fact, in which the very word for culture is an import. In our case "kôkya." A while ago I was walking with an old friend of mine who works as a linguist in the palace of the Queen-mother of Asante across the palace gardens to some traditional ceremony. I asked him why it mattered. "Eye ye kôkya," he told me. "It is our culture."

But trying to find "our kôkya"—the authentic stuff of our Volksgeist—can be like peeling an onion. The traditional garb of Herero women in Namibia derives from the attire of 19th-century German missionaries, though it's still unmistakably Herero, not least because the fabrics they use have a distinctly un-Lutheran range of colors. [Slide 27—Herero Women] And so with our kente cloth: the silk was always imported, traded by Europeans, produced in Asia. This tradition was once an innovation. [Slide 28 Kente] Should we reject *it* for that reason as untraditional? How far back must one go? Cultures are made of continuities *and* changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren't more authentic; they're just dead. [Slide 29—Blank] Pious talk of the authentic is often, in any case, wonderfully misdirected. Someone once told me the story of a collector of recipes who arrived in a Cambodian village yearning for authentic local cuisine. "Here's a dish" one of the locals began. "You take smoked tongue of water ox ... well, if you can't get smoked water-ox tongue you can use shrimp." "No, no," the visitor said, "I want to follow exactly your authentic recipe." "Really," said the Cambodian, "we only use water-ox tongue because we can't get shrimp."

Cosmopolitans don't need to endorse every appeal to cultural preservation; preserving culture—in the sense of artifacts—is one thing, preserving cultures is quite another.

National identity matters, then, in our responses to art. But Herder would have insisted we need to keep hold as well of the other side of the cosmopolitan package: which says, every object is indeed an expression of the Geist, but human beings need to share the product of their communities across boundaries. Now I've been discussing his thought without questioning it, as if I agree with it. Let me now insist that this strikes me as one of the great philosophical misunderstandings about the arts.

Art is not made by nations or cultures, it's made by people. It may take a lot of people to make a work of art, as it does to make each performance of Beethoven's Ode to Joy. It takes a lot of people singing the right notes and musicians playing the right instruments in the right order and blending their sounds together. But still, it's made by them and the work that they're making, the work that they're expressing was itself made by a person, one person in that case. A person who operated in an environment, shaped by a local culture, but also shaped of course profoundly, since that person was Beethoven, by a musical culture that was not in any natural sense, national alone.

More than this, the way in which the national context informs art is not the way that talk of the Geist suggests: it is not because each artwork belongs together organically with the other products of its Geist. The name for that view is organicism. And the right picture is not organicist. Every element of culture—from philosophy or cuisine to the style of bodily movement—is separable in principle from the others; you really can walk and talk like a black American *and* think with Matthew Arnold and Kant as well as with Martin Luther King and Miles Davis. There *are* organic wholes in our cultural life: the music, the words, the set-design, the dance of an opera fit and are meant to fit together. It is, in the word Wagner invented, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art. But there isn't one great big whole called culture that unites organically all these parts. Kafka and Miles Davis can live together as easily as Kafka and Strauss. What is true in high culture is true in cuisine: Briton's have swapped rice and curry for fish and chips. You will find the style of hip-hop in the streets of Tokyo. Spain—in the heart of the West—resisted liberal democracy for two generations after it took off in India and Japan—in the East, the home of Oriental despotism. Jefferson's Western inheritance—Athenian liberty, Anglo-Saxon freedom—did not preserve the United States from creating a slave republic.

This truth has become more easily visible in the last century or so, since much of the art that we now most value, especially much of the art that we have seen produced in the last 100 years, is just profoundly not national. Consider Picasso, [Slide 30] caught posing for Man Ray here as one of those Romantic Geniuses.

This is an artist who took inspiration from a Vili figurine from the Congo, [Slide 31] shown to him in Paris—he, of course, not being French but, as the Guggenheim insists, Spanish—shown to him in Paris by a Frenchman, Henri Matisse, [Slide 32] at a party [Slide 33] at the home of an American, Gertrude Stein [Slide 34: Stein by Picasso]; and inspired by it, he helps create a new form of art which then travels the world, both in the sense that his painting is admired and appreciated in many countries and travels to those places, but also in the sense of course that he provides inspiration to many people including many contemporary African painters, out of African art academies.

That circulation is essential to the life of the kind of art we care about, the arts we care about. It's essential obviously to literature as well. The first great history of English literature was written by a Frenchman, Hippolyte Taine. Taine had a terrible time trying to tell the history of English literature in this nationalist vein because of course, all the people you immediately think of as the geniuses of that tradition are people who are profoundly conscious of, interacting with, inspired by, literary art from other places. This fellow [Slide 35—Shakespeare], whom you recognize I am sure, was inspired by Italian sonnets by this fellow, Petrarch [Slide 36—Petrarch],

whom you may not recognize, and by stories from Greece and Rome, told by people like Livy, and so it goes. [Slide 37—Livy]

Or consider all those wonderful Russian novelists that we so much admire, why is there all that French in them? Or why is one of Goethe's [Slide 38] greatest poetry cycles called the *West-Ostliche Divan*, which is, of course a Persian word? Because it was inspired by the fourteenth century Persian poet Hafez (whose tomb is still a place of cultural pilgrimage for Iranians) [Slide 39] There are reasons, in short, for skepticism about the idea that culture, or at any rate the stuff we rightly care about most—is national in any deep sense. I leave aside the difficulty that much of what we care about is ancient, and that even if it is the product of nations, those nations are gone. There is no Etruscan nation to think of as the proud contemporary possessors of Etruscan art. [Slide 40] There's no king of Nok, there's no Kingdom of Nok, there's no Nok people even, to be the possessors of those wonderful Nigerian sculptures. [Slide 41] [Slide 42] So if they belong to a nation, they don't belong to anyone any more. Whereas, I claim, in the spirit of cosmopolitanism that, in fact, they can belong to all of us. So it seems to me that the idea that all culture is national, or that it beyond to ethnic groups, is—to use a word of criticism that we favored when I was a teenager—hopeless.

But it is an idea that underlies some of the debates about cultural appropriation in our time. After a memorable appearance in the film “*Crazy Rich Asians*,” as the heroine's brassy sidekick, the Asian-American actress and rap artist Awkwafina faced accusations of cultural appropriation for, essentially, “talking black.” [Slide 43—Awkwafina in *Crazy Rich Asians*] In the other direction, various black rap artists have been accused of cultural appropriation, Orientalist division, for borrowing markers of Asian culture: Samurai regalia, kimonos, geisha fans.

So, if you don't buy the concept of cultural appropriation, you'll be tempted to dismiss the complaints people make about it. Sometimes you'd be right to. But sometimes their hackles are raised for good reasons

Cultural appropriation is said to take place when a borrowing involves power disparities: a dominant group appropriates from a weaker group. But—to start a list of perplexities—the fluidity of the “power” concept can make it tricky to establish who's on top. How should we assess the power dynamic when black American performers help themselves to sartorial signage from Japan, one of the richest nations on the planet?

Consider, for that matter, how eager India's ruling elite has been to assert yoga as a national possession. The country's asana-adept prime minister, Narendra Modi established a separate ministry to develop and propagate yoga and other traditional health-related practices. “This is little doubt about yoga being an Indian art form,” the yoga minister has said. Baba Ramdev, a hugely popular guru who helped bring Modi's Hindu-nationalist party to power, records videos of yoga poses and movements that are watched by millions.

Now, Baba Ramdev does a terrific downward-facing-dog—he says it triggers hair growth—but in India, Hindu nationalists like him are the top dogs. (Swami Ramdev himself controls a multi-billion-dollar corporation.) Try explaining to a Dalit, a Muslim, or an Adivasi in the subcontinent that the people they consider their overlords are really an oppressed, marginalized, and subordinated group. “One person's center is another's periphery,” as the Hindu scholar Wendy Doniger has observed.

The real problem is that ownership is the wrong model. The arts progressed perfectly well in the world's traditional cultures without being conceptualized as “intellectual property,” and the traditional products and practices of a group—its songs and stories, even its secrets—are not made more useful by being tethered to their supposed origins. But vigorous corporate lobbying has made the idea of intellectual property go imperial; increasingly, it seems to have conquered the world. To accept the notion of cultural appropriation is ultimately to buy into a regime they favor, where corporate entities acting as cultural guardians “own” a treasury of Intellectual Property, and extract a toll when others make use of it. [Slide 44—Blank]

So “cultural appropriation” provides off-the-shelf language for unease—an unease that sometimes arise from a real offense. Typically, it involves forms of disrespect, which can indeed be predicated on power inequities. If you’re a Sioux, you recognize that your people are being ridiculed when some young white students put on a parody of the headdress of your ancestors and make whooping noises. But the problem is, precisely, disrespect, rather than theft. Suppose the rap musician Kanye West had made a music video in which he used the Kaddish, the Aramaic prayer used in Jewish mourning, to mourn a Maserati he’d totaled. Here, again, the offense isn’t appropriation; it’s the insult entailed by trivializing something another group holds sacred. When an American pop star makes a mint from riffing on Mbaqanga music from South Africa, you can wonder if the rich American gave the much poorer Africans who taught it to him their fair share of the proceeds. If he didn’t, the problem is not cultural theft but exploitation. People who parse such transgressions in terms of ownership have accepted a commercial system that’s alien to the traditions they aim to protect.

Disrespect and exploitation are worthy targets of our disapproval, but “cultural appropriation” is ripe for the wastebasket. Even when it’s applied to a real problem, the diagnosis only invites confusion. The harder task will be to give up the ideology of cultural ownership, to resist the temptation to cast every practice as property and every affront as a property crime. The rhetoric of ownership is alluring and potent—but when we’re describing the quicksilver complexities of culture, it just isn’t appropriate.

A few final thoughts: It is relatively easy nowadays to make a copy of the Mona Lisa so good that merely looking at it—as you would look at the original in the Louvre—you could not tell the copy from the original. But only the original has what Walter Benjamin called the aura: only it has the connection with the hand of Leonardo. That is why millions of people, who could have spent their plane fare on buying a great reproduction, have been to the Louvre. They want the aura. It is a kind of magic; and it is the same kind of magic that nations feel towards their history. One of the many symbols that recurs regularly in Asante iconography is a little bird, [Slide 45: Sankofa] with its head turned back to pick at the feathers between its wings, a bird called sankôfa, which means, literally, “Go back and get. There’s a Twi proverb that says: [Slide 46]

Woto twene na wosan kôfa a, yénkyiri.

*If you throw (something) away and you go back and take it, it is not taboo.*

The proverb, which you hear often, can be used to say, of course, that it is good to retrieve what you need from the past. We all understand that feeling. The connection people feel to cultural objects that are symbolically theirs, because they were produced from within a world of meaning created by their ancestors—the connection to art through identity—is powerful. It should be acknowledged. The cosmopolitan in me, though, wants to remind us of other connections.

One connection is the connection not *through* identity but *despite* difference. We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can only fully respond to “our” art if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art. But equally important is the human connection. My people—human beings—made the Great Wall of China, [Slide 47—Great Wall of China] the Chrysler Building, [Slide 48—Great Wall plus Chrysler Building] the Sistine Chapel [Slide 49]: these things were made by creatures like me, through the exercise of skill and imagination. I do not have those skills and my imagination spins different dreams. Nevertheless, that potential is also in me. These connections through our common humanity are made in the imagination of course, but so are the connections made through our more local identities. And to say this isn’t to pronounce them unreal, but to say what makes them real. Both are surely among the realest connections we have. [Slide 50—Title Page]