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Interview: Factum Foundation's Ferdinand Saumarez Smith on Preserving the Bakor Monoliths

Preservation, documentation, facsimiles and restitution: the Bakor monoliths, Cochno Stone, Chad rock art, and the Sacred Cave of Kamukuwaká



Chiefs of Oyengi with the last remaining carved monolith. All photos by Ferdinand Saumarez Smith unless otherwise noted. Courtesy Factum Foundation.

Kate Fitz Gibbon with Ferdinand Saumarez Smith - May 31, 2021



Ferdinand Saumarez Smith

Ferdinand Saumarez Smith has worked with Factum Foundation since 2014 as a technical specialist, project developer, and curator, including on a number of rock art related projects in Scotland, Chad, Easter Island, and Brazil. Over the past six years he has

been working in south-eastern Nigeria to preserve and promote the Bakor monoliths, which will culminate in an exhibition at The British Museum in Spring 2022 (Covid-19 situation depending). Previous exhibitions include "Soane's Ark: Building with Symbols" which was held at Sir John Soane's Museum in London in 2017, and which explored the great English architect's relationship with freemasonry. In addition to his work with Factum, Saumarez Smith is currently writing his doctoral dissertation at King's College London titled "Eleusis and Enlightenment: The Problem of the Mysteries in Eighteenth-Century Thought."

This month, Cultural Property News is republishing your article "[Thefts, Fakes and Facsimiles: Preserving the Bakor Monoliths of Eastern Nigeria](#)" from Factum Foundation's *The Aura in the Age of Digital Materiality: Rethinking Preservation in the Shadow of an Uncertain Future* (Silvana Editoriale, 2020).[\[i\]](#)

KFG: We got to know each other while talking about documenting the monoliths and how the Bakor community has called for bringing them back to the region. Can you tell us more about that?

FSS: The real substance of this is the restitution issue and the importance of rethinking both ownership and preservation. It is a complex situation in almost every way but the example of the Bakor monoliths is very well documented which adds clarity. Philip Allison goes there in 1961-1962, sent by John Picton



who is now a Professor Emeritus at SOAS, but at that time was a curator at the National Museum in Lagos. He sends Allison out to do this documentation. If that hadn't happened, none of this would be possible, but with that archive and being able to look through all the records of all of these museums, we can say, "Here is the photograph. It's in Nigeria in 1961-62 and now it's in your museum in 2021. How did it get there?"

Monolith at Old Nkrigom.

We can piece together the story from the beginning. I've written to John Picton and he said there was never really any problem with theft or looting before the Biafra civil war, but then that whole region was really destroyed. There were famines, there was a really terrible situation there, and after that, things started to go missing. Allison documented nearly 300 monoliths; our project recorded 215 still in Nigeria. But of course we weren't just using a black and white film camera and

a notebook like Allison was. We were using photogrammetry to 3D-scan them and drones to map and geo-locate the sites.

The monoliths probably went out over the border to Cameroon. It's a fluid border; its the same communities so it's very easy to move these things across. The minute they are in a different jurisdiction, it's quite easy to get them on to the international market.

Despite what I know, I feel quite powerless in terms of how we can trace these first stages to how they got to a dealer. We can trace two or three stages of provenance, but we don't seem to have very much power to go to the source. A lot of these monoliths can be traced back to one or two specific persons, but at what point is there the power, legally, to force that situation to find out where they got them from?

KFG: Are there monoliths now in Nigerian museums?

FSS: Yes. One of Phillip Allison's objectives on that trip in 1961-62 was to select five or six monoliths which are now in the courtyard of the Nigerian National Museum. In his archival notes it says, "collected, February 1961." There are also a couple in the Calabar museum, and one in the Oron museum nearby.

KFG: Did Allison make any notes about people objecting to him taking them?

FSS: That would be very interesting to know. I would have to check back on that. I'm trying to remember whether there is mention of money being exchanged with the community at that point for those objects. That would give you some insight as to how much these things were valued at that point.

KFG: The Committee for Cultural Policy recently worked together with a group of Nigerian attorneys for a publication we did with TrustLaw on Nigerian heritage laws and how they are implemented. But the attorneys were not able to access a lot of the information they were looking for; it just wasn't publicly available. This raises the question, does the Nigerian government want to see these losses investigated, for whatever reason?

FSS: I have to say that I tried to locate the complete reports that Philip Allison must have given to the National Museum after his survey, but that wasn't possible. But I do know that they are in the process of reorganizing the storage rooms in Lagos and in Calabar which has made it easier to access the collections. There are all sorts of day to day challenges in running these

institutions. But I don't know enough about the broader political situation. I'm focused on what we can do practically in this specific situation.



Site of the Alok Open Air Museum visitor centre; supported by the Carène Foundation.

KFG: Rather than blaming the Nigerian government for failing to keep good records or blaming the art trade for circulating objects

that were considered legal, it seems like what you are doing is the most effective way to reach a positive solution. By publicizing the Allison report and alerting museums that are going to be the end recipients of these objects and trying to foster appreciation for them within Nigeria you create the possibility for cooperation and people can see the necessity for loans or returns.

FSS: You've got to think about it in stages. The trips we have done over the past five years have really been about documentation and dialogue. They've been a collaborative effort between us and the archaeology departments of the University of Calabar and the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. We've brought skills and technology to the table which can make "first-aid" records. And we've tried to make it sustainable by offering 3D-documentation training and providing equipment like drones. But that has to go hand in hand with talking to the communities, because at the end of the day, they are going to be the people who preserve them long-term. My colleague Dr Abu Edet from the University of Calabar really comes into his own at this point. He gives these passionate speeches about how people have got to look after the stones because they are both their ancestors and their culture. To put it in pidgin: "Take care of una Papa. Na him be una identity, wey him make to represent am when him no dey alive again. Look after una Papa now-o!"

What is tragic is that the ongoing damage caused by deforestation and farming are not insoluble problems. We just need a targeted approach that goes through the various sites one by one to come up with some simple solutions. One of the things I think that we should consider is removing some of the most badly damaged examples to a safe space. Not necessarily to a museum, but maybe to the center of the village, where they can be looked after. A few communities have done this independently. The visitor center at Alok that we are creating will be a base where we can start to do these kind of things with the local communities. We also need to go much deeper into the meaning of these monoliths. One of the things I'm really excited about is the work being done by

Dr Ivor Miller, who is linking up the Bakor monoliths to Ekpe, or the leopard society, which was the form of traditional government before the colonial era. They use ritual anthropomorphic stones in their initiation ceremonies and many people believe that the markings on the monoliths relate to their symbolic language Nsibidi. We also desperately need some archaeological work carried out – I still don't have a good answer for when they were carved! With these things in place we will be able to have a much more informed discussion about the ownership, sharing, archiving, and preservation of them, in Nigeria and internationally.



Monolith at Eting Nta.

KFG: It seems that documentation is the foundation for protection for now and for the future. If you find a piece in a forest and photograph it then it can't be taken and sold. What else has your own documentation done besides confirm that an object is there or is missing?

FSS: There are monoliths that we have documented in private and public collections that weren't documented by Phillip Allison. We've certainly been to sites that he didn't get

to. I'm fairly sure there are a couple I've seen that look like they came from a site that Allison didn't get to. There was one very weird moment I had in a warehouse in the outskirts of Brussels when the manager brought out two shapes wrapped in blankets and neither of them was the one I had come to record. One looked like it came from a site Allison didn't record, but I knew exactly where the other one came from. It was a phallic-style monolith from a site called Oyengi and the chief had said to me when I was there, help us find these things! And in the process of the project, we did. I thought, what are the chances of that happening?

KFG: Your article makes clear that there are advantages and disadvantages in leaving the Bakor monoliths where they are. They could be brought to the Alok Open Air Museum in Nigeria, there are museums around the world that could bring them to a different public, there are farming communities that are Christian and have abandoned certain older practices but the people are still deeply attached to them and regard them as ancestors. But then some of them

are probably safer in museums because agricultural burning practices are putting them at risk, and in the forest, they can be taken by people using heavy equipment for logging. How do you resolve such a complex situation?

FSS: I find this question of the relationship between an object with spiritual power and a facsimile fascinating. There was a really interesting moment when we arrived at this village called Eting Nta, which is where a monolith which is now in the Musée du Quai Branly is from, and was sold to them by a dealer called Pierre Darteville in 1998. I came with a small model of the monolith, having 3D scanned it in the Musée du Quai Branly and presented it to the community and said, "Do you remember this?" And one of the old guys in the village said, "Oh my God, that's our Ebi Abu!"

He said that it was stolen in the 1970s. The villagers had accused each other of having sold it. People went to court. But – there's the statement: "That's our Ebi Abu."

I said to them that we could bring you back a facsimile, would that be useful to you? Would that have the same cultural meaning? And Dr. Abu Edet went a little bit off that message and was saying, "No, no. They do not want a replica. They

do not want a facsimile. This Ebi Abu is literally an ancestor, so a facsimile isn't enough."



Reunited Ntitogo monolith being CNC-milled, using computer controlled machining tools.

But, having said that, on the other side, I do think even if it's not the actual ancestor, a facsimile can raise questions about how, if something was there in 1961-2 that a group of people say was stolen in the 1970s, it is justifiable that it's in that museum. This isn't about sending back facsimiles in place of the originals. It is an act that is meant to draw

attention to the wider issues and provoke discussion.

We have to acknowledge though that it's not necessarily about some white guy coming in and just taking them. Realistically, there is someone in the community that has enabled it. In fact, Chief Akong who recently passed away but was curator of the Alok Open Air Museum for many years came to the

attention of Ekpo Eyo [Ed. a former director general of Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments which oversees over 100 museums and the monuments in Nigeria, including two UNESCO World Heritage sites] from his trying to stop one being sold by his own community. Dr Edet often says this phrase in pidgin to the communities: 'Na inside house rat na him de invite outside rat to steal from inside house.' Meaning that thieves from inside the community invite thieves from outside it to steal. Although in another site, I remember someone saying that there was a white dealer who came about ten years ago and tried to take a monolith but because of its spiritual power it would not come out of the ground. A sort of Arthurian legend story. Who knows if that's true.



I don't know if in many cases it could be a situation in which someone came over the border from Cameroon with a Toyota truck and took them. These are very big bits of rock – some are 2½ meters long. To move some of these would require the kind of big machinery used for logging. That's a reason why someone from the community has to be involved and why most of it likely happened when they were chopping down the forest.

There is evidence of continuing spiritual practices associated with the monoliths at Neborokpa.

KFG: Factum seems to be mindful of involving the local people or the indigenous people in the projects you do. One thing that's often lacking in archaeological or anthropological work is to involve the local people or to help them to benefit directly from it. If it's not somehow rewarding to them, do they have as much incentive to preserve it?

FSS: That's something I'm often aware of in Bakor and something my colleagues in the Trust for African Rock Art have emphasized. You have to be quite careful not to say that you are doing this for tourism and to raise too many expectations. It's one thing in Kenya, but in southeastern Nigeria, these places are not going to be seeing tourism in the foreseeable future. You have to be careful about making that economic argument. But one thing we have been trying to do is to find economically beneficial alternatives to planting cassava around the monoliths, since this uses slash and burn. We would like them to consider the possibility of planting cocoa trees rather than cassava to recreate

the original forest atmosphere and provide a financial benefit to the communities without endangering the monoliths. We also want to build an economy around the recording of the monoliths, building an archive, sharing their stories.

KFG: We haven't talked yet about fakes.

FSS: There are a lot out there, including three I have seen that I am pretty confident have been carved by the same person or workshop. One is in the British Museum. Another is one we discovered in the Israel Museum which we found when we went to record another large one from a site called Akumabal. I found that one randomly on Google images. Someone had been to the garden of the owners and had taken a photograph. One was bought the year before last by the New Orleans Museum of Art. We visited some of the people who carve them in the Bakor region, whether for sale or for their own pleasure, and showed them pictures. They said, not only is it the wrong type of stone but we can tell from the marking that this is someone who doesn't know what the language of the markings from Bakor is. It's easy for them to say, yeah, this is a fake because these are not the real motifs that are found on them. I have to say that I am quite sympathetic with this situation, museums are doing wonderful things and are really doing their best, but there's a bit of poetic justice there when they buy a fake. Although, even if the carvers get paid something, the dealers will certainly get paid a lot more. Instead of spending money on owning one, the museums should give the money to us! This is an ongoing situation. Last year we were contacted by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security about a shipment of monoliths they seized which had been sent from Cameroon, which turned out to be extremely poor quality fakes.



Monolith at Egunonkwor.

KFG: What kind of funds are going to be needed to really protect the Bakor monoliths? What about companies working in Nigeria that are taking out other resources – have they an interest in funding cultural heritage projects and publications?

FSS: We've been fortunate to be supported in the past by Prince Claus Fund, Jim and Paula Crown, and the US Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. But the key name to mention for Factum's current work in

Nigeria is the Carène Foundation, a Swiss-based foundation that is funding the project at the Alok visitor center. I also hope that the work will attract some Nigerian support. I know that Professor Abba Isa Tijani, the new Director General at the NCMM, has recently called for the help of the private sector in preservation. [Ed. See <https://dailytrust.com/why-we-must-protect-our-national-heritage-dg-ncmm>] Hopefully we can find some philanthropists in the new generation of wealthy Nigerians. We've done the groundwork, all that is needed is a little bit of a push to try and implement our plans in each of the sites, and to carry on our 3D-scanning training so that we can have a complete digital archive.

I also think that the art world could be doing some of the funding. I get depressed thinking about where money is going. Some monoliths are not very



valuable, about 20,000 euros, but some of these monoliths, the really large ones, can sell for 600,000-700,000 euros. At Factum, we can do a lot for very little and for a fraction of that we could solve the problem and ensure that the sites are protected. I find it a bit depressing that in the last 50 years people have been more interested in owning these things that they haven't really understood, rather than going to the places and finding out about them and ensuring that they stay there.

Monolith at Old Nkrigom.

KFG: How interested is the Nigerian government in following up with this project?

FSS: I feel like right now we are in an extremely good position because Professor Tijani has been very supportive of all of this work that Factum is doing. He has given permission for this project to go ahead at the Alok Open Air Museum and setting up the Visitor Center. He's been extremely engaged. He wants the monoliths to be preserved and understood, shared and valued. He has offered his support to make this happen, but they are in a situation where like everyone else they are underfunded and they have a whole country of things to look after. The last thing I'm going to do is criticize the people I am working with who are doing their utmost. It's been an extremely fruitful relationship. I love working in Nigeria and I hope we can do much more there.

One of the things that I thought was a good signal happened in producing the Google Earth map which collates all of the data and records that we've gathered from Bakor. Professor Tijani said this is great but don't make it publicly available because it could be a sort of a la carte menu for people who want to go and find these things. I felt like this was a good indication that he was a person who was keyed into the issues.

KFG: What's going on now with this project and how can people follow up on it?

FSS: There's so much going on. The exhibition planned for the British Museum in October 2020 is now hopefully scheduled to happen in Spring 2022. I am trying to juggle whether we go ahead with the Alok project and then do the BM. Ideally, we would have the British Museum exhibit first and then do the Alok so we have the sense of it moving to Nigeria afterwards. I'm not going to make predictions!

In terms of other things going on, I've been working a lot with colleagues in Cameroon, we're trying to finalize an MOU with the Ministry of Culture to possibly work on an upscale of the Google Maps project to produce an inventory of cultural heritage objects there, and also bringing together this element of tracking down objects in international collections. I really think that rather than taking a hardline position on restitution debates, if we are putting out all of the evidence for people to look at, that's the most valuable thing that we can do.

The next project I am working on with Factum is happening this July at a site called Laas Geel in Somaliland, a fantastic painted rock art site. Somaliland is a fascinating country that is not recognized by the US or the UK or EU. We'll be doing some training there in heritage documentation which is a key component of what we do. We've also heard that there are lots of Islamic manuscripts in the region and we are hoping to be able to apply the same approach that we are using in Dagestan, where we are working with the Peri Foundation and Sheik Juma al Majid's foundation for Culture and Heritage to document the manuscripts and make them accessible.

COCHNO STONE



The Cochno Stone designs were linked into a form of star charts by Ludovic McLellan Mann. Wikimedia Commons.

KFG: I hoped you could also describe some of your past rock inscription work – you've been involved in so many projects. Did you start with the Cochno Stone?

FSS: The first project I developed with Factum was up in Scotland working on a Neolithic cup and ring stone called the Cochno Stone which was buried by the local council in the 1960s to prevent it being vandalised. The thing that really caught my imagination were pictures of it from the 1930s, when an amateur archaeologist, a very eccentric guy called Ludovic McLellan Mann, had painted extraordinary star charts linking up the different cup and ring markings in a sort of grid. There were magnificent black and white photographs of totally far out, Prospero-style magical things.

I had to think, what is this object? What has happened to it? We know it's there. Nobody has seen it for 50 years. What is the best way to make it accessible again to people whilst protecting it?



The Cochno Stone. Glasgow, Scotland. Wikimedia Commons.

The idea that we negotiated with Historic Scotland was that we would excavate it, 3D scan it, and then carefully replace all of the earth to protect it. We did it, we dug it all up. Unfortunately, one of the legal complications was that part of the stone projected into someone's

garden, so it wasn't possible to keep it open.

I was hoping that it would gather enough attention to raise the money to do a facsimile but that didn't happen. But I think it was an effective Factum project because it did what Adam Lowe does best, which is telling a story. We are able to find narratives that can shine a light on bigger issues.

As much as there was a problem with kids vandalizing these things – and we did find a couple of names scratched in – you also have to think about the heritage body's thinking at the time. Covering something with two feet of earth is not something we would do now. That was a nice project for experiencing questions about the history of things and how we treat them.

ROCK ART IN NORTHERN CHAD

KFG: Then you went to northern Chad for the Trust for African Rock Art?

FSS: After that we had a couple of projects with the Trust for African Rock Art that we were very fortunate to be on but that I did not develop. Both of those were in northern Chad, in the Eastern Ennedi and then in Tibesti in the north. In terms of rock art, these are the sort of Sistine Chapel type sites, incredible engraved depictions of animals that were there at the time when the Sahara was savannah. All of that incredible landscape, which is desert now, was once rolling grasslands, so you have elephants, you have amazing depictions of human figures as well.

In a way what I was saying about this element of storytelling – the art was better in that case and it is valuable to do, but actually the story is not as interesting as the weird cup and rings marked stone on the edge of the housing estate in Glasgow.

KFG: One fascinating thing about this is the story of the climatic change, but does experiencing the Saharan sites have the immediacy and sense of purpose of your other projects?

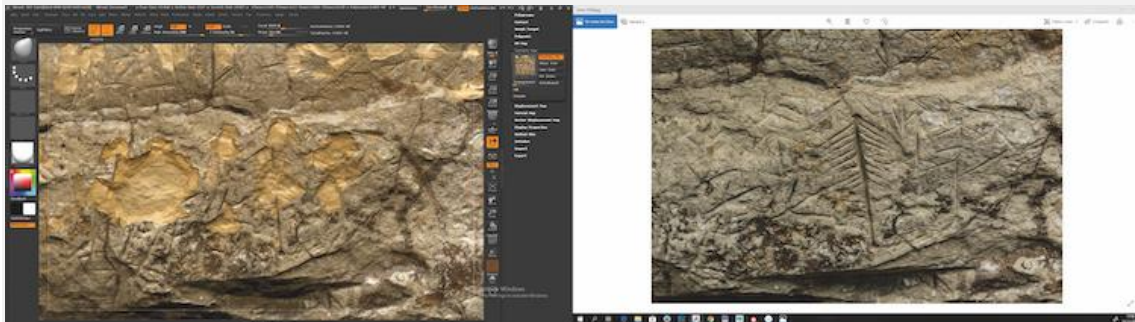
FSS: Climate issues definitely have a role to play, but in terms of looking after these things – they are in the middle of the desert. They have been there for a long time. You record them and hope for the best. We did find out that one of the sites was attacked a year later and a few things were hacked out. The best thing you can do is going on one of the tours that TARA does with Pier Paolo Rossi, a geologist. It's his business to bring in tourists, but he is taking photographs every time he goes out there, just out of love and to be checking up on things.

KFG: You wonder how this happens, these places in the middle of nowhere where people have left records in stone going back for hundreds or thousands of years. There's a giant rock formation in the middle of flat desert here in New Mexico called El Morro, where there's a spring and Native Americans and

Spanish conquistadors and American soldiers and people coming through on wagon trains have all carved graffiti into it, a history book written on rock.

FSS: It reminds of this other site that we worked at in Lebanon called Nahr el-Kalb, which is just north of Beirut. It's a place where invading armies since the time of Nebuchadnezzar have left commemorative stelae of their time there. You have these geographical locations that have particular physical characteristics that mean that people are going to go through there because you are on the way to conquer somewhere and it's a nice place to stay the night. That kind of layering of history is really incredible.

XINGU AND THE SACRED CAVE OF KAMUKUWAKÁ



Records of the carvings at the sacred cave of Kamukuwaká in Brazil. Courtesy Factum Foundation.

KFG: Factum Foundation also went to Mato Grosso in Brazil and collaborated with the indigenous filmmaker Takuma Kuikuro, in the village of Ipatse in the Xingu region. And you found that a disastrous event had occurred at another site that you were there to document – deliberate destruction that changed the nature and purpose of the project from just documentation to a literal reconstruction of an indigenous people's history.

FSS: We did a project at the sacred cave of Kamukuwaká in Brazil starting in September of 2018. The Kuikuro and the Wauja are the two indigenous peoples that we worked with in Brazil. We were introduced to the Kuikuro by an organization called People's Palace Projects that is based out of Queen Mary University in London but also has a base in Rio.

Arriving at Kamukuwaká was really a bizarre moment. I had seen photographs of the cave, but when we got there, we knew something was seriously wrong. It had been attacked and large sections of the surface were destroyed, and chunks hacked out. Sadly, I sometimes feel that it may partly have been in response to our coming to document it. It seemed almost too timed, the

damage seemed quite fresh. Was it on some level done because word got out that some people were taking an interest in that site?

With the best intentions of trying to preserve these sites, if you're coming into a situation where there are enormous tensions between the farmer communities and the indigenous communities inside the protected territory, things can happen. I think we still should have tried to preserve that site but at the same time I worry that our coming could have been a factor in the attack on it. We will never know, but I don't think that can make you stop trying to document the place and draw wider attention to it.



Community members working on the rendering of the Kamukuwaka cave wall. Courtesy Factum Foundation.

KFG: Did the people who hacked it apart hope to diminish your interest or to keep you from drawing wider attention to the situation of the indigenous communities?

FSS: I don't think it was so much about stopping us recording it. Perhaps it was more about making a point undercutting the indigenous communities' claim to that land. What we have actually achieved is to amplify the importance of the site and organizations like The British Council have got involved. The iconoclastic attack was counterproductive because they drew more attention to the thing they tried to destroy. With the digital restoration we did, the material evidence of the indigenous communities is now in the public domain where it can be studied and discussed. We are also trying to get the facsimile back to the Wauja. If we can get it back there, then it will continue to play its role in transmitting ancestral knowledge.

Factum's technologies are very much conditioned by Western concepts about aging and aging. The first time we went to Xingu and the first project we did required us to think outside the box when we collaborated with the filmmaker and artist Takuma Kuikuro. Working with the Kuikuro was a different kind of experience for me. In a culture where so many of the objects are impermanent, where they live in these fantastic houses called ocas made of thatch and wood, and their cultural productions are things like feather headdresses and body decoration that are also impermanent, things that take on their meaning

through action. We ended up scanning the entire village because they were starting the process of moving it, which they do when the burial ground in the center gets filled.

Then we heard from a colleague, Nathan, who went back there the following year that there was this site, Kamukuwaká that is the place where all the communities in Xingu look back to as their site of mythical origin, and the engravings on this cave tell that story of their legendary origin. It's legendary, right, but it's real. The way it's expressed is legendary but the truth is it has a close connection to their actual history. In terms of whoever hacked out those engravings, it's about chopping those people off from their history. It's striking at the root of those people's identity. Rather than stopping us from recording it, it was a strike against them.

The process of reconstructing the cave was fascinating, because it blended together three types of evidence: the 3D scans of the cave in its damaged state, photographs that had been taken before the attack, and the collective memory of the Wauja community. My colleague Irene Gaumé worked painstakingly for hundreds of hours producing a speculative reconstruction, which we then printed out on large rolls of paper and sent back to Xingu. We also sent layers of acetate so that the community could correct the first draft. These corrections were then incorporated into the final facsimile. The result wove together high resolution scanning technologies with storytelling – a great symbol for what Factum does!

[i] See also [The Interview: Adam Lowe of Factum Arte](#), in Cultural Property News.