

# Who Owns The Past?

The world's great museums face demands to send their treasures home

BY BETSY CARPENTER

It was time to send the 3,300-year-old mummy back home to Egypt, Bonnie Speed decided. The museum she directs, the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Atlanta's Emory University, had bought the wizened corpse from a small museum that was folding, back in 1999. But it was, after all, "the remains of a human being," Speed says, "not a work of art." Testing confirmed that the body was probably that of Ramses I, a general who claimed the Egyptian throne in the 13th century B.C. Returning it to the Egyptians, she says, just seemed like "the right thing to do." The museum's trustees agreed, so last October it was packed up and flown home, where it received a royal welcome.

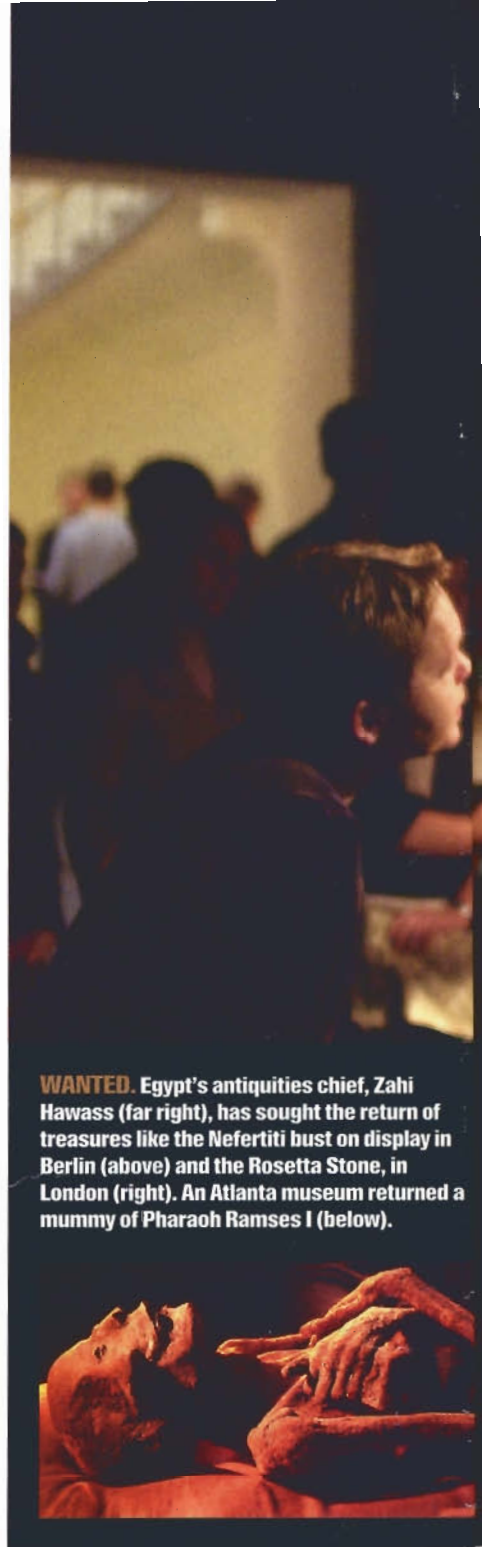
But returning Ramses was a rare clear-cut choice in the growing controversy over who owns—or *should* own—a country's cultural patrimony. Increasingly, antiquities-rich lands from Egypt to Afghanistan are pressing for the return of treasures taken decades or centuries ago and now displayed in museums in the United States and Europe. Some governments want to redress colonial-era wrongs or highlight their country's glorious past.

Like the museums themselves, they undoubtedly have their eye on the bottom line as well: Marquee artifacts can help draw millions of visitors a year.

Last summer, for instance, Egypt's top antiquities official asked for the return of several "masterpieces," including Paris's landmark obelisk in the Place de la Concorde and the Zodiac of Dendera, which describes the positions of various planets and now rests in the Louvre. And Greece is renewing its old claims to the so-called Elgin marbles—sculptures from the Parthenon now in London's British Museum.

**Standing fast.** For the most part, museums have rejected such claims, fearing that repatriation of even a few treasures could unleash an avalanche of demands that would result in the dismantling of their collections. Three weeks ago in London, the British Museum hosted a conference affirming the value of "enlightenment" or "universal" museums, showcasing artifacts from across cultures and ages. Their case has been bolstered by the looting and vandalism in Iraq, which has thrown into stark relief the value of dispersing a culture's treasures around the world as a safeguard against turmoil at home.

But change is in the wind: Even as mu-



**WANTED.** Egypt's antiquities chief, Zahi Hawass (far right), has sought the return of treasures like the Nefertiti bust on display in Berlin (above) and the Rosetta Stone, in London (right). An Atlanta museum returned a mummy of Pharaoh Ramses I (below).

seum officials make the case for universal museums, some admit that they are looking more closely at the claims. Zahi Hawass, head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, is using every weapon at his disposal to retrieve his country's treasures. In addition to the zodiac and the obelisk, he has demanded the return of a famed bust of Queen Nefertiti, on display in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, and the Rosetta Stone, which helped 19th-century scholars decipher hieroglyphics



instance, was dug up by Napoleon's Army in 1799. In 1801, as part of the spoils of war, it was turned over to England, where it has been displayed ever since. The bust of Nefertiti was discovered in 1925 by German archaeologists working under "find sharing" agreements, in which newly discovered objects were divided between the expedition and Egyptian authorities. By all accounts, the Egyptians viewed the bust and passed on it, but officials later said that they did so because the archaeologists disguised its beauty under a layer of grime.

Some researchers fear that Hawass, author of the new book *Secrets From the Sand* (Abrams, 2003, \$40), wants not just to reclaim Egyptian treasures but to make his country the leading force in the field of Egyptology, traditionally dominated by foreigners. This concern was heightened last summer when Hawass put new restrictions on non-Egyptian archaeologists. They are now prohibited from working at more than one site during the same season and, for the next decade, are barred from digging at prime sites south of the Nile delta. Hawass says he wants to encourage excavations at sites elsewhere that are threatened by rising water tables and agricultural development. "These regulations are not for the benefit of one individual," he says. "They are to protect the Egyptian monuments."

Greece has taken a softer line in its efforts to repatriate the priceless sculptures sawed off the Parthenon by the Scottish peer Lord Elgin in 1801. Last March, Greek authorities asked that they be returned to Athens in time for the Summer Olympics next year. "We are not raising the legal issue regarding

ownership of the marbles," says Culture Minister Evangelos Venizelos, "because we are seeking a friendly and consensual solution."

In fact, the marbles are too fragile to be returned to the temple itself. But Athens is building a museum within view of the Parthenon where it hopes to house the entire frieze—both the panels now in England and those that stayed behind in Greece.

Those hopes may be dashed. British



and now rests in the British Museum. Hawass also wants all of the reliefs cut from Egyptian tombs over the past two centuries—literally thousands of artifacts scattered among museums around the globe. An archaeologist, Hawass has offered carrots to cooperating museums—for example, a promise that they will get to host traveling shows of precious relics. But he also plays hardball, threatening to sue uncooperative museums.

It's been an uphill fight. Hawass's de-

mands for masterpieces taken long ago have been rebuffed, at least in part, because they wouldn't stand up in court. (The Atlanta museum returned the mummy without any prodding from Hawass.) Many countries have "patrimony" laws meant to keep newly discovered artifacts at home, and a 1970 UNESCO convention encourages countries to work together to enforce such export restrictions. But all went into effect after many famed antiquities were nabbed. The Rosetta Stone, for

FROM LEFT: KEYSTONE / ILLUSTRATION / GAMMA; PATRICK CHARPIS—GAMMA



**GONE.** A 1931 photo shows one of two giant Buddhas at Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The Taliban destroyed both in 2001 (right), underscoring the risks facing priceless antiquities in unstable lands.



Museum Director Neil MacGregor said in August that he will not give the Marbles back. The museum's trustees, he explains, "believe that the world benefits by being able to see and understand the surviving sculptures in two different contexts—as an achievement of ancient Greek culture in Athens, and of world culture in London." Others argue that the British Museum has done a much better job of preserving the sculptures over the years than Greece. Indeed, those that remained in Athens have been ravaged by air pollution.

But while some art-rich countries have been merely neglectful, others have been actively hostile to treasures from the past. Remember the huge Buddhist statues carved centuries ago into the cliffs of Bamiyan in Afghanistan and destroyed by the Taliban? Their fate looms over an ongoing debate in Norway about the "Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism," which were spirited out of Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power. Some say the scrolls, now housed in the private Schøyen Collection in Oslo, should be repatriated—if not immediately, then as soon as the Afghan government is able to protect its cultural heritage. Others counter that although the Bamiyan Buddha smashers are long gone, turning the

invaluable artifacts over to that troubled country would be irresponsible.

The Iraq war has underscored the dangers of keeping all of one's cultural eggs in one basket. In May, just after the Baghdad Museum was looted, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened its "Art of the First Cities" exhibit. The show, which borrowed heavily from the collections of the Louvre and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, among others, showcased ancient Mesopotamian treasures like those reported lost in Baghdad. "Had prior generations of researchers not enjoyed amicable find-sharing arrangements so that treasures of Mesopotamian cultures can be seen all over the world," wrote Beverly Schreiber Jacoby, a New York-based art consultant, in a recent issue of the *New York Law Journal*, "everyone would be even more alarmed than they are" by the looting in Baghdad.

**All together.** Directors of the world's leading museums, however, believe their case for holding on to archaeological treasures goes far beyond safekeeping. At the London conference three weeks ago, the Met's Philippe de Montebello said that the museums and the diverse collections they house serve as a "lab" for understanding humankind. "To me, the

great value of the universal museum is that it is the greatest of family trees, in which every culture finds its branch," de Montebello says. Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage, adds that repatriating works of art often dramatically narrows the public's access to them. "We have to keep what we find in the universal museums," he says.

A case in point, Piotrovsky says, is a rare copper bowl that came to the Hermitage in the 1920s from Kazakhstan, as part of a temporary exhibit that stretched on for decades. When Kazakhstan became an independent state after the Soviet Union's collapse, it demanded the bowl back; reluctantly, Piotrovsky complied. Now, he says, the bowl rests in a mosque, where few visitors can go.

Yet museums and claimants may be inching toward some common ground. American museum directors said recently that they are revising guidelines for addressing repatriation claims. And some combatants are working toward creative solutions:

While not giving up hope of bringing key artifacts home for good, Egypt's Hawass is now requesting them on temporary loan for the opening of a new wing of the Egyptian Museum. Even the Elgin sculptures could make a visit home for the Olympics. Greece and the British Museum reportedly are discussing a possible loan.

And while they defend the idea of a "universal museum" with the common heritage of humankind on display under one roof, museum directors are looking for new missions. The British Museum's MacGregor stresses the need for short-term exhibits and lectures pulled together quickly in response to current events. During the war in Iraq, the museum's Mesopotamian collection drew large crowds of people, thirsty, he says, for "a deeper view of the country than that on their television screens." Dietrich Wildung, director of Berlin's Egyptian Museum, says institutions like his need to focus more on swapping artifacts and mounting traveling exhibits to gain the widest possible exposure for what they have. "In former times, our most important business was to buy," he says. "But the time of acquisitions is over." ●

*With Gillian Sandford in London*