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Public funding and private collecting

*by Richard I. Ford, editor, CMA Newsletter
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Museums conserve collections documenting human activities in the past and the present from around the world for purposes of education and research. Anthropological collections when used in exhibits or for instruction expand our horizon of personal experience. The same materials under the careful study of a researcher open new vistas for human understanding. Despite a triad of recurrent hardships--limited finances, insufficient personnel, and inadequate space for exhibition and storage--museums are fulfilling their public obligations better than most non-professionals realize.

Museums undermine their mission, however, when they exhibit material objects from private collections in preference to comparable or even better objects available in the public domain, that is, in museums. The "Sacred Circles" exhibit offers an example of this situation. Most of the ethnographic and archaeological objects in the exhibition are from American or European museums. But not all. Some are on loan from private individuals and not all of them are of the same quality as what could have been selected from public museums. This is indeed unfortunate since an impression is left suggesting that museums simply do not have objects as "nice" as those in private hands.

The consequences of using public funds to sanctify private collecting are serious. First, private ownership of ethnographic and archaeological materials appear to be endorsed by museums. By publicizing these activities we are ignoring the results of competitive collecting--desecrated archaeological sites, rivalry with museums for purchases, refusal to permit legitimate scholars to study objects, etc. Second, by exhibiting

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these objects and documenting them in catalogs their resale value is artificially inflated. By flaunting private collections at the expense of public museum material, our duties as museum workers to extinguish the antiquities market and to justify our curatorial and custodial role to the general public are diminished.

This position does not deny the existence of private collecting. But it does call for a more judicious use of private holdings for display. Certainly some material objects in private hands are superior to those in museums and many educational ideas would be incomplete without their inclusion. Other objects are not readily available in any museum and these should be exhibited. Under these conditions no alternatives are in order.

Public funds should not be used to enhance personal prestige or gain at the expense of the anthropological record or museums of anthropology. State and federal agencies should require justification for including private holdings when they are supporting an exhibition. They should be willing to bear the extra cost that might be accrued obtaining museum objects in order to reinforce the importance of museums in preserving America's cultural patrimony.

Museums are having enough difficulty. Unfortunately we stand to lose even more by using public funds to disregard the foundation on which we stand.

Note: Editorial opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Council for Museum Anthropology. They are printed for contemplation and debate. Alternative positions are invited for publication.

**Association for
Gravestone Studies**

The Association for Gravestone Studies, newly formed society for the study and preservation of that fast-disappearing cultural artifact--the early American gravestone--offers memberships at \$5 student, \$10 active membership, \$25 sustaining membership. This brings a Newsletter with question and answer service; an organizing conference July 2 and 3 at the Dublin School, Dublin, N.H. in 1977; reduced rates on publications (the Proceedings of the 1976 conference are now in press); a scholarly conference at the Dublin School in 1978. Send dues to the A.G.S. c/o the University Museum, Anthropology Dept., SUNY, Stony Brook 11790 or to the Dublin School, Dublin, N.H. 03444. Any CMA member wishing a free copy of the 1st issue of this Newsletter, please write to us.

**Folk Classification
Newsletter**

The Folk Classification Newsletter is now available for a \$5.00 annual subscription. Organized by Brent Berlin, Terance Hays, and Eugene Hunn, it seeks an interchange of diverse perspectives on the processes and substance of human conceptual organization as it is abstracted from or imposed upon the world of experience in the earth's cultures. Folk classification in this sense includes cultural objects, natural phenomena, etc. Subscriptions should be sent to Folk Classification Newsletter, c/o Dr. Eugene Hunn, Rt. 1, Box 1554, Toppenish, Washington 98948.