

# **Re-contextualization of collections: Collaboration and exchange among museums**

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## **Re-contextualization of collections: Collaboration and exchange among museums**

### **Abstract:**

A recent international collaborative project for conservation and documentation of a historic Peruvian archaeological collection can be viewed as a partnership between a museum *of empire* and a museum *of origin*. The Paracas collections, excavated between 1925 and 1928 by Julio C. Tello, founder of Peruvian archaeology, are both a national symbol and an archaeological incognito, due to lack of access – until recently – to archives conserving excavation data. Recent research initiated in Peru provides new opportunities for international collaboration. This model can be implemented by other museums, to improve the contextual information, conditions and interpretation of existing collections.

**Keywords:** Collections documentation, international collaboration, Peru

I write this essay to present and advocate for a model of resource and information exchange among institutions differentially situated in relationship to geographic origins, documentation and funding sources for the care and contextualization of museum collections. From 2004 to 2006, I was involved as an outside researcher in the design and realization of a campaign to preserve and protect fragile organic objects from an early 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeological collection in the National Museum of Archaeology, Anthropology and History of Peru.

Central to the project was integration of archival information on the original excavation contexts at the site of Paracas and subsequent museum history of each object, recently available 60 years after the death of the excavation director, Dr. Julio C. Tello. A second focus has been to reconnect the Paracas Necropolis cemetery assemblage to those funerary bundles that left the National Museum in Lima to be researched and exhibited in other museums, including some in other nations. The project was made possible by a Dumbarton Oaks Project Grant for work on sites and collections at risk. Based on the achievements of this three-month campaign, we advocate that other museums *of empire* and *of origin* develop partnerships for similar projects.

### **Histories, power inequities and collections management:**

Museums located in politically and economically hegemonic nations, or urban centers, face some issues in collections management and interpretation that are quite opposite from many of the issues faced by museums in former colonies or regions economically dominated. At the same time, both groups of museums have features and concerns held in common: typically, a highly educated, concerned staff faced with scarce resources and enormous responsibilities in the custody and research of their collections. While differences in the scale of resources available in historically dominant and dominated places and the historic flow of artifacts from the latter to the former naturally lead to

conflict, some paths towards conflict resolution may lie in recognizing that institutional needs may be complementary and ameliorated through collaboration and exchange.

The terms museum *of empire* and museum *of origin* refer to fluid and relative concepts. Any particular museum can be both, in reference to the geographic and historic origins of particular objects or collections. For example, Dumbarton Oaks is a museum of origin in the design of its gardens, yet the plants contained in them reflect: 1) custody of native species; 2) collection of species exotic to this locale, facilitated by political and economic power, and 3) exchanges with researchers and institutions, in relationships of mutual benefit and respect. The Byzantine and Pre-Columbian collections are linked to relationships of empire, yet the institution, as a research center, constantly hosts and provides material support to scholars from communities of origin. The Dumbarton Oaks budget does not include funds for acquiring objects to increase its collections, but is instead devoted to support for new research, conferences and publications.

The National Museum of Archaeology, Anthropology and History of Peru, viewed from Washington, D.C., is a museum *of origin*. However, located in the urban sprawl of Lima, its relationship to the “provinces” from which its collections are largely drawn is one of a history of extraction and hegemony. In the specific case of the Paracas collection, it was excavated by Tello between 1925 and 1928, and was important in the founding of the National Museum. The Paracas peninsula lies on the Pacific coast south of Lima in the Department of Ica, where a tiny Paracas site museum and the Regional Museum of Ica have more restricted collections and almost no operating resources. Viewed from either Paracas or Ica, the National Museum looks like a museum *of empire* - though even in Lima, the museum staff must care for substantial and fragile collections, mount exhibits and conduct research on a radically austere budget.

Museums *of empire*, located in the historic centers of political and economic power, custody many artifacts without documented provenance, often extracted by traders or looters, bought by travelers and collectors, and separated by time and space from the personal knowledge of those who once might have interpreted them. Other artifacts come from research contexts, and returned to museums and other research institutions – closer to “origin” or closer to “empire” - with the researcher. Some of these latter objects came with quite good provenance and contextual documentation, but even in those cases, they may be separated from the field notes and historic memory of those who once might have intended to study them further or always be present to explain them.

Objects in museums *of origin* frequently suffer from the limited resources of the regions or nations in which they are housed, where generations of learned and impoverished custodians struggle to keep them away from rats and thieves, in hope of finding opportunities for further study and for the noble purposes of heritage custody and the education of an urbanizing populace.

Objects in major collections typically were carried “back” by researchers based in these institutions, in the context of colonial or post-colonial relationships of unequal power that affected the permits for extraction from one nation and shipping to another. Anger over

the loss of heritage objects, including objects that both embody and are emblematic of cultural roots and sacred practices, fuels the call for the return of collections to their place “of origin,” as mediated by the contemporary nation-state.



Students Ana Murga and Berta Flores sew protective tulle netting over a fox skin headdress and a sloth skin from mortuary contexts of the Paracas Necropolis excavated by Peru’s National Museum in 2007-8. In the background, Textiles curator Carmen Thays and conservator Maribel Medina mount a Paracas mantle for travel to an international exhibit.

This frustration over losses may extend also to study collections of objects that are neither sacred nor uncommon, causing many museums to eschew their role as custodians of these objects and wish to de-accession, or hide them in storage. Thus our museums may fail to carry out the roles of cultural exchange and mutual education that may justify this sort of movement of objects, either around the world or within the nation-state.

Real solutions to this quandary lie only in addressing the power issues that create the injustices, and the differentiated and unequal flow of objects and knowledge. As long as

sacred and precious objects are extracted - with or without “permission” - and taken as curios to custody in regions that constantly assert economic power and cultural hegemony, while toxic waste and forced acculturation flow massively in the other direction, no collection can be completely just. However, this is not the same as saying that no collection can be justified.

Collection and display in an appropriate and respectful manner honors and celebrates the arts and practices of an admired community. In urbanizing societies, where practices are moving from the common ground of participatory community practice to the staged setting of displays or exhibits with “presenters” and an “audience,” collection can be a valid form of material history and provides an opportunity to value and continue cultural practices, even as they are transformed by changes in their social context.

For this very reason, the reduction of objects to themselves alone, as beautiful or masterful achievements divorced from contextual information that may re-embed them intellectually in a specific history and as part of a series of practices, may not be ideal. This is a seductive route in the “global north”, where we work with museum collections that are so often impoverished by a lack of understanding of their original context. However, a more fruitful path may be to work in collaboration with the communities and museums where similar objects retain access to their context. Pre-Columbian collections can benefit enormously from being “re-contextualized” through collaboration with museums whose collections, spectacular or fragmentary, have been – relatively speaking – properly excavated and documented.

The museums that hold properly excavated collections retained in their region or nation of origin may also house the scholars most versed in this particular field. However, they rarely count on the resources available to museums *of empire* – even those going through stringent circumstances. Some collections should be returned to these museums *of origin*, even given their limited means. But in other cases, the highest priority for a regional or national museum is to recover the information embodied in a population of objects that at some time were lost, stolen, loaned or exchanged. These objects may be “legally” held, or not, but in either case links between them and their original context often have been broken due to theft, accident, neglect or wartime, to the detriment of their interpretation in the museum that now holds them, and the frustration of those who research the context from which they came.

### **The case of the Paracas Necropolis:**

The 429 burials inventoried in 1927-8 at the Necropolis of Wari Kayan at the Paracas site constituted, until recently, the largest Pre-Columbian cemetery archaeologically excavated on the desert coast of Peru.<sup>1</sup> The fine conditions of preservation of textiles and other organic materials, including the human body, make this site one of our most important sources of information on pre-state complex societies of two thousand years ago in the Americas. Due to the fact that the ancient Andean peoples dressed their deceased ancestors to be periodically on display and an active social presence among the living, this site provides extraordinary information on textile history and the semiotics of

regalia, as well as the role of ancestors in an Andean society during a fascinating period of intercultural exchange and increasing social complexity.

Some of the objects designated as “Paracas Necropolis” in style are the product of clandestine excavations on the south coast of Peru in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and have no documented provenance. While these objects may be legally held by museums in various parts of the world, those museums would all greatly benefit by supporting research on the better-documented collections held in Peru (Del Aguila 2003).

Certain objects currently in private and public collections should properly be returned to the National Museum of Archaeology, Anthropology and History of Peru, which houses most of the collection originally excavated by Julio C. Tello between 1925 and 1928 at the Paracas site. These include objects documented in Tello’s excavation inventories and later museum records, and sent on loan to an exhibit but never returned (Mould 2005), as well as a few that have “gone missing” without a museum record of loan or exchange in the eighty years since they were excavated, or have been flagrantly stolen from the National Museum or a regional museum (Peters 2004).

On the other hand, a few objects and some entire mummy bundles were officially sent in exchange to other museums for study and exhibit, including regional museums in Peru – for educational purposes and regional pride – and some museums in the United States – with thanks for scholarly collaborations and material support for Tello’s research and the National Museum itself (Tello and Mejía 1979, Daggett 1991). The museum archives contain records of these processes, and ideally these Paracas Necropolis gravelots might be considered not legally problematic and integrated into any research strategy on the topic. However, until recently it was not possible to access the archives to track each object, reconstruct mortuary contexts, and study the most famous area of the Paracas site, the “Necropolis of Wari Kayan,” as a cemetery population. Researchers have not had access to excavation notes and inventories or to museum records at the National Museum. Information on and access to the gravelots sent elsewhere are especially problematic, even for the Peruvian curators of the principal collection.

Since Tello’s death in 1947, his archive at the National University of San Marcos was sealed. Subsequently, Tello’s closest associates and intellectual heirs, archaeologist Toribio Mejía Xesspe and National Museum Director Dr. Rebeca Carrión Cachot, continued to secretly work with personal copies of the site inventories and excavation and laboratory records, in order to carry on the work of publication and collections management that Tello had left in their hands. Initial publications by Peruvian and international scholars had focused on objects from the more elaborate “principal burials,” that were the first priority of study from the 1920s to the 1940s (Tello 1929, 1959; Yacovleff and Muelle 1934; O’Neale 1942). Some analysis and publications by members of the Tello’s research team (Carrión 1931, 1949; Tello and Mejía 1979) also address a broader sample, including other cemetery groups at the Paracas site and simpler gravelots from the Necropolis itself. However, these published studies provide information on only a tiny sample of the excavated materials.

Most analysis published outside of Peru focused on the textiles, extraordinary not only in their fine preservation over some 2,000 years, but also in their striking, brilliantly colored imagery, spatial organization and complex techniques. Scholars like Raul D'Harcourt (1962 [1934]), Cora Stafford (1941), Jane Dwyer (1979), Anne Paul (1979, 1990 et al) and Mary Frame (1986, 1991 et al) examined textiles in the collections of Peru's National Museum and those in collections of other museums around the world. A substantial amount of research was carried out with little access to information on the contexts in which these textiles had been found. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most scholars had given up on understanding the Paracas Necropolis as a site, as an excavation, or as a cemetery population.

### **The re-contextualization project:**

In an international meeting organized by Anne Paul in the World Cultures Museum in Göteborg, Sweden in 2001, Carlos Del Aguila made a call to representatives from museums in Europe and North America to collaborate on joint projects with museums in Peru, both for the care of the collections from Tello's historic excavations and to carry forth the mission of research on Paracas. Then Sub-director of research at the National Museum, Del Aguila asserted that the Tello archives at the Museum and at the National University of San Marcos were in the process of inventory and would be soon accessible to researchers. Moreover, the Toribio Mejía Xesspe archive at the Riva-Agüero Institute of Peru's Catholic University was being catalogued and would soon be available. He argued that supporting research on the Paracas site, and on the possible connections between their own collections and documented contexts from Paracas was in the interests of curators in museums around the world.

In 2004, I began meeting with Del Aguila, at that time Director, and the curatorial team at the National Museum to develop a plan combining archival work with the conservation and documentation of fragile organic materials from the Paracas Necropolis. While contextual research and documentation is important for every category of object recovered at the site, this project was developed to focus on those objects which have received the least care and attention during the 60 years since Tello's death. A more specifically targeted project was feasible, since it could fit into a number of interrelated efforts on "re-contextualization" already initiated and encouraged by Del Aguila at the museum.

Advances by the National Museum team include development of a database on the museum records and current location of each funerary bundle or human remains from the Paracas site, a database of the museum's extensive ceramic collections, and a database of textiles currently located in the museum's climate-controlled textile storage facility. The project proposal was developed in a series of meetings in June 2004, among all the curators at the National Museum, director Del Aguila and collections manager Fernando Fujita. I proposed to work in the archives to compile contextual information that would be useful for the study of all categories of materials. At the same time, conservators and student interns under the supervision of the curators and conservation experts in the

departments of Textiles and Human Remains would work from the objects, including cleaning, stabilization, documentation and movement to better storage contexts.

In November 2004, this project was presented to the Project Grants program of Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks. This program provides modest funding (today a maximum of \$10,000) for projects addressing a context or collection at risk. Despite being located in a museum, the Paracas collections can be considered to be at risk due to the physical deterioration of certain types of materials in the humid and contaminated environment of Lima. Salts, acids, and alkaline agents hasten physical degeneration of the objects. Biological agents ranging from mold to insects and rodents attack not only the objects, but also the paper and ink of their labels and the wooden storage units. This deterioration can be dramatic and ongoing due to inadequate storage facilities, particularly in those departments of the National Museum that have not received outside funding for care of their collections during the past sixty years. Moreover, access to the three archives, in a climate friendly to research and multi-institutional collaboration, had not been possible for sixty years and could not be assumed to be a permanent new circumstance.

We were fortunate to receive the grant, and met again in June 2005 to work out specific policies, procedures and a calendar of work at the Museum, as well as to initiate work in the archives. The Project grant was designed to support approximately three months of work in Peru. I was physically present from December 12, 2005 to March 8, 2006, but thanks to the organizational roles played by Carmen Thays, curator of Textiles, Elsa Tomasto, curator of Human Remains, Maria Ysabel Medina, textile conservator, Melissa Lund, physical anthropologist, and Manuel Gorriti, curator of Organic Materials, work on the museum collections continued through the end on March. With the added participation of art historian Alberto Ayarza, archival research and development of reports in each department of the Museum continued after that date. Expenditures and initial documentation of the funded project were completed by the end of June 2006, to comply with both the end of the budget year at Dumbarton Oaks and, with a change of government in Peru, the closure of an institutional cycle at the National Institute of Culture.

Complying with different institutional requirements and calendars, producing reports written in different languages and meeting distinct cultural expectations are challenges common to all international projects. The “re-contextualization” project was facilitated by similarities in core values, identity and institutional culture between the “donor” and “beneficiary” museums. Perhaps even more important was the good will and common goals shared by the authorities in both institutions.



More than one hundred *Furcrea* sp. fiber slings and headress elements lie in their new storage boxes in the Textiles department of the National Museum of Archaeology, Anthropology and History of Peru, together with conservation data sheets and the published and archival sources used to confirm, correct and augment contextual data for each object.

This project was subsequently criticized as lacking a formal “convenio” or institutional agreement on the highest level, signed by representatives of the USA and Peru. Yet its effectiveness was linked to its organization as a direct collaboration between two museums, linked by a facilitating researcher. A relatively short term, low-budget project, it could only make a significant improvement in the state of collections if included a substantial contribution in human resources on the part of the National Museum. The National Museum met and exceeded expectations; their expert staff trained and supervised the student interns who carried out most of the painstaking work of artifact cleaning, construction of protective supports, documentation and storage. If supervision and other administrative costs had been charged by the National Institute of Culture and the National Museum, the entire project budget could have easily been diverted to pay overhead. Instead, a policy of donations “in kind,” bought and accounted for by the outside researcher, allowed project funds to go directly to equipment and supplies for work in each department of the museum.

Achievements of the project include cleaning, documentation and storage of human skeletal materials, mummified remains, and associated artifacts, including feathered pins and fans, fox-skin headdresses, human hair headdresses, fiber slings and other cordage, miniature garments, feathered tunics, skin tunics, tiny skin bags of pigments, fine wooden lances, tendon-bound staves, and offering containers such as baskets and gourds. The original inventory information for each object was confirmed – or in some cases corrected – and contextual information reconstructed. Histories of gravelot study, object conservation, storage and exhibition were compiled. All objects were stored in chemically stable polyethylene boxes that facilitate their future monitoring for biological agents and possible deterioration. Objects were also grouped according to provenance data and clearly labeled to facilitate future inventory and research.

While the re-contextualization project was not able to locate every object originally inventoried in the Paracas Necropolis excavations and the subsequent unwrapping of funerary bundles, it was successful in treating and researching all objects in the above categories with a currently known location in the storage facilities of the National Museum. Moreover, the documentation and preventative conservation of these objects has provided several types of information hitherto unknown for the Paracas Necropolis site, opening new topics for future research. The archival research, carried out parallel to the object-based research, provides the necessary data to reconstruct lost contextual relationships. It also allows us to place the current, documented collections of the National Museum in a clear relationship to the cemetery population and assemblage originally excavated at the Necropolis of Wari Kayan.

The information generated by the process of “re-contextualization” is not owned or controlled by a single researcher, but rather has been turned over in its entirety to the National Museum staff. It contributes to the improved conditions for ongoing and future research on the museum’s collections and on the topic of Paracas, particularly for a number of Peruvian researchers, both at the museum and outside, who are currently engaged in reconstructing and analyzing mortuary contexts from the Paracas site.

It is possible that this project represents an exceptional moment, based on the good will and professionalism of a group of curators and archivists at a certain historic moment. However, we argue that in fact it is based on a set of common interests, and can be replicated in other collections and other institutions.

Both Dumbarton Oaks and the National Museum have in their collections objects designated as Paracas Necropolis. Dumbarton Oaks has only two objects, which are beautiful and representative, but lack provenance. Study of the thousands of objects from the Paracas Necropolis in the collections of the National Museum enriches contextual understanding of the small sample at Dumbarton Oaks. Strong arguments have been presented for not conducting research that includes purchased collections, in order to not increase their market value or perceived social validity. However, research that instead focuses on contextual knowledge increases our appreciation of all related objects, while turning attention to the value of properly excavated and documented collections.

Moreover, as a research institution, Dumbarton Oaks has not simply been a museum of empire, but as a foundation affiliated with Harvard University it has actively supported fieldwork and museum-based research carried out in Peru. In fact, Tello himself had studied at Harvard, coincidentally during the period when Dumbarton Oaks was first being conceived, and Tello's original research at the Paracas site received support from Harvard's Samuel Lothrop. More recent studies of Paracas textiles by Anne Paul and Mary Frame also have been supported by Dumbarton Oaks. It is not surprising, therefore, that this institution has developed a Project Grant that can effectively benefit both collections and scholarship in the museum of origin.

However, I consider that other museums in North America, Europe and Asia – and elsewhere – that hold Paracas style objects in their collections can benefit by supporting custody of the collection and research on Paracas at Peru's National Museum and regional museums. Specific research projects in formal or material analysis should be designed to integrate a contribution to the improvement of the physical facilities of the museum, as well as improvement in access and management of data for subsequent research. Moreover, the expertise of curators and conservators from Peru's National Museum could contribute to resolving problems in the care and exhibition of objects from Paracas – and other Peruvian sites – in museums abroad, where such objects may constitute a small proportion of a worldwide collection.

The National Museum already provides expertise in conservation and exhibit preparation to both international traveling exhibits and regional museums within Peru. As a museum *of empire* relative to the Regional Museum of Ica and site museum at Paracas, it could do more to develop local resources for collections conservation, storage and exhibit development – particularly when such projects may be facilitated by modest support from international sources.

The National Museum also has an active interest in conducting its own research in Paracas collections in other museums around the world. In a few cases, such research could involve requests for the return of objects. In many more cases, such research would allow the reintegration of certain gravelots into the data set of the Paracas Necropolis cemetery, or another section of the site. This would not only benefit research on the history and mortuary traditions of Peru's south coast – it would also enrich the information that the museum currently in custody of these gravelots can present about their collection. Even in the cases where Paracas style objects in a museum collection have no known or reconstructable provenance, our increasing knowledge about the provenance of other objects closely related in style, iconography and material composition will inform future interpretation of that collection.

The terms and philosophy of this kind of museum-to-museum exchange can be applied in many other partnerships between museums that hold common interests based on improving the contextual documentation of their collections. In cases where it may not be necessary, desirable or possible to return all objects to a museum that represents or approximates their place of origin, that museum can at least incorporate detailed information on those objects into the data that inform their research and exhibits. In

return for material and logistical support for the care and documentation of collections in museums “of origin,” donor museums receive in return the inestimable benefit of greater knowledge of their own collections, as well as a contribution to global understanding.

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National Museum librarian Benjamin Guerrero and archivists Merli Costa and Elizabeth López provided me with access to original documents, with assistance from Maria Eugenia Huayanca and Rocio López de Castilla. Art historian Alberto Ayarza agreed to join me in archival work, and took on transcription and replication of sketch maps and drawings. He also contributed to database development, and played a key role in making documents generated by the project available to all departments at the Museum and to the archives at the National Museum and Instituto Riva-Agüero.

National Museum curators Carmen Thays, Elsa Tomasto, Maritza Perez, Julissa Ugarte and Maria Inés Velarde, were all involved in the original project design. Curators Carmen Thays in Textiles and Elsa Tomasto in Human Remains assumed the responsibility for project management in the museum. Carmen Thays and Maria Ysabel Medina developed policies and procedures for conservation of fiber-based organic materials, and museum conservator Rosa Martínez played an important role in conservation of other materials. Curators Manuel Gorriti in Organic Materials and Dante Casareto in Ceramics provided dynamic leadership in locating, cleaning, identifying and registering “lost collections” within the museum. In the particularly challenging area of Human Remains, Melissa Lund worked closely with the student interns, and Elsa Tomasto managed and developed the database on gravelot history and current location.

Student interns who provided major assistance and received training as part of the project include Haydeé Grandez, Karina Curillo, Ana Murga, Berta Flores, Melina LaTorre, Franco Mora, and Lizbeth Tepo. Lin Chalco and other student interns assisted as part of their work in the department of Human Remains. Ivan Ccachura, and Luz Segura assisted with identification, cleaning and storage in the department of Organic Materials as part of their practicum processing substantial, previously unregistered collections.

Expert textile conservator and practicing weaver Rosalia Choque took a three-week hiatus from another research project in the MNAAHP to work on analysis and

conservation during February 2006. Carlos Murga, in charge of the storage of Human Remains, played a key role in developing and implementing storage policies and procedures in that department. In Organic Materials, Milano Trejo facilitated our work as he registered newly rediscovered artifacts. Museum administrator Juan Silva made sure that all equipment donations were properly documented, and was unfailingly welcoming and supportive.

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<sup>i</sup> The burials salvaged from the Inka period site of Puruchuco by Guillermo Cock between 1999 and 2002 now far surpass the Paracas Necropolis cemetery in number. That site was engulfed by the growing suburban sprawl of greater Lima.