

CASE STUDY

The Politics of Return: Museums, Repatriation and Cultural Diplomacy in Italy, Albania, and Canada

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In an era of intensifying global interconnection and mounting pressure for historical reckoning, repatriation¹ has emerged as a critical arena where museums navigate the fraught intersections of cultural diplomacy and sovereignty.² Once framed primarily as a legal or ethical imperative, the restitution of cultural property now functions as a strategic site of negotiation³ that compels museums to redefine their roles within transnational networks of cultural governance. As institutions historically tasked with the stewardship of contested objects, museums today operate as diplomatic actors engaged in processes that transcend national boundaries⁴ and implicate broader structures of international cooperation and historical accountability, an evolution that mirrors ongoing efforts to redefine the very role of museums within global institutions such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM).⁵ This paper situates repatriation as a distinctly political practice, one shaped by transnational pressures, contested sovereignties, and shifting institutional roles.⁶ As Neil MacGregor has noted in *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, museums use objects to tell stories about human civilization, power, and identity; the possession and narration of those objects, then, becomes central to how institutions assert authority and interpret the nation.⁷

This paper examines how these dynamics unfold through two distinct yet interconnected cases of repatriation: the 1982 return of the Goddess of Butrint, a classical marble head

¹ The terms *restitution* and *repatriation* are often used interchangeably in cultural heritage discourse, yet they carry distinct connotations. *Restitution* typically refers to the return of cultural objects to individuals or communities as legal owners, often following illicit removal or theft. *Repatriation*, by contrast, denotes the return of cultural objects to a nation, Indigenous people, or cultural group, often grounded in ethical, historical, or diplomatic frameworks rather than legal title. This article uses *repatriation* to emphasize the political, symbolic, and sovereign dimensions of return. See Collections Trust n.d.; Museums Association 2021; and Scovazzi 2020.

² Phillips 2005.

³ Prott and Patrick 1992.

⁴ Message 2023.

⁵ Sandahl 2019.

⁶ See ICOM 2022:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

⁷ MacGregor 2010.

removed from Albania under fascist Italy,⁸ and contemporary Indigenous-led repatriation efforts in Canada,⁹ specifically focusing on the repatriation of ancestral remains and funerary objects to Rainy River First Nations (RRFN) from the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). The former is an example of the use of cultural heritage as a political instrument during the Cold War, framed as a diplomatic gesture by the Italian state. The latter, conversely, positions museums as mediators in Indigenous–state relations, reframing repatriation as an act of cultural sovereignty and ethical redress.

Although these cases differ significantly in many aspects, including legal structure, political context, and institutional form, comparing them reveals how repatriation consistently functions as a site of cultural negotiation. Both cases mobilize heritage not only to address the past but to signal future-oriented aspirations: in Albania's case, a gesture of post-fascist reconciliation and an early expression of cultural diplomacy; in Canada, a reassertion of Indigenous nationhood within a settler-colonial framework. Taken together, they illustrate how repatriation allows museums to perform new roles in mediating claims to justice and shaping postnational or pluralist political futures.

This study contributes to broader debates in museum studies, international law, and heritage diplomacy by positioning museums not only as stewards of material culture but as actors embedded in transnational negotiations of power. Drawing on primary case analysis and existing scholarly literature, the paper asks: How are museums functioning as diplomatic agents in the politics of return? What do these cases reveal about the evolving relationship between sovereignty and heritage governance? And how might repatriation, in both postcolonial and post-socialist contexts, reconfigure the institutional authority of the museum?

While the cases of the Goddess of Butrint and Indigenous-led repatriation in Canada may initially appear disparate, one rooted in Cold War geopolitics and the other in contemporary Indigenous rights movements, this paper argues that examining them in tandem reveals underlying continuities in how museums navigate cultural diplomacy and the politics of restitution. Both cases involve the negotiation of sovereignty, albeit through different historical and legal frameworks: The Goddess of Butrint repatriation illustrates how cultural property was leveraged as a political instrument during a period of intense diplomatic maneuvering, whereas Indigenous-led repatriation demonstrates the ongoing struggle for cultural sovereignty within a settler-colonial context.¹⁰ By placing these cases in dialogue, this study highlights the strategic mobilization of heritage as both a diplomatic asset and a mechanism for asserting claims to historical justice.¹¹

Repatriation, rather than a peripheral concern, emerges as a critical site where museums negotiate international integration, historical justice, and institutional transformation. By situating the Goddess of Butrint and Canadian Indigenous-led repatriation within broader frameworks of cultural diplomacy and postcolonial critique, this paper argues that restitution is not merely a legal or ethical process but a cultural and political negotiation that compels museums to reposition themselves as transnational actors engaged in the complex terrain of cultural governance.

⁸ Gilkes 2002.

⁹ This comparative framework emerged from the author's doctoral research on the museological history of the Museo Nazionale Romano (1981–2000), during which the Dea di Butrinto case was encountered in the context of Cold War-era museum diplomacy. The inclusion of Canadian Indigenous repatriation reflects the author's broader scholarly engagement with questions of restitution, sovereignty, and cultural diplomacy and aims to bridge institutional and decolonial approaches to repatriation within an international frame.

¹⁰ Krmpotich 2010.

¹¹ Macdonald 2009.

Cultural diplomacy, long studied within international relations and cultural theory, is foundational for understanding museums' political agency. Benedict Anderson's idea of the "imagined community" (1983)¹² foregrounds how national identity is constructed through shared cultural symbols, including those displayed and interpreted in museums. Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* (1989)¹³ further elaborates the institutional role in mediating national memory, suggesting that museums operate not just as passive storehouses but as active participants in shaping collective imaginaries. Clifford Geertz, from a different vantage point, proposed that cultural institutions are sites of symbolic action, staging narratives that make political meaning legible through ritual and form.¹⁴ Together, these frameworks help position the museum as an actor of soft power, embedded within the infrastructures of both statecraft and international cultural exchange.

In postcolonial settings, restitution is often interpreted not simply as a legal resolution but as a form of historical correction. It marks an effort to confront and redress cultural violence through the symbolic return of looted or appropriated material. Scholars such as Bénédicte Savoy¹⁵ and Dan Hicks have scrutinized the role of Western institutions in amassing colonial collections,¹⁶ while Ruth Phillips has analyzed how repatriation in settler-colonial contexts enables forms of cultural renewal and sovereignty.¹⁷ Instruments such as the 1970 UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)¹⁸ Convention and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) have formalized normative frameworks for restitution, particularly Article 12, which affirms Indigenous rights to repatriate ceremonial objects and human remains¹⁹ – provide normative frameworks, but much of the real work happens within asymmetrical political negotiations. Repatriation, therefore, must be understood as part of a broader field of postcolonial memory work, one that engages legal, ethical, and diplomatic logics simultaneously.

Museums have, in recent decades, come to occupy a role that transcends national narratives and heritage policy. As Kylie Message notes, museums now operate as sites of political negotiation, particularly in moments of social upheaval or historical crisis.²⁰ Their authority rests not simply in the objects they display but in their capacity to mediate between competing claims – whether from nation-states, Indigenous communities, or diasporic publics.²¹ This development signals a shift in museological practice from custodianship to diplomacy. The museum's relevance, in this light, lies in its ability to engage in ethical negotiations across borders and to accommodate the demands of a multipolar world of memory and belonging.

¹² Anderson 1983.

¹³ Nora 1989.

¹⁴ Geertz 1973.

¹⁵ Savoy 2022.

¹⁶ Hicks 2020.

¹⁷ Phillips 2011.

¹⁸ The 1970 UNESCO Convention established the first comprehensive international legal framework aimed at preventing the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property. Adopted in response to growing concern over the trafficking of antiquities, it requires signatory states to regulate trade, improve documentation, and facilitate the restitution of unlawfully acquired cultural items. UNESCO, *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, adopted 14 November 1970, entry into force 24 April 1972. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1970.

For a comprehensive analysis of the 1970 UNESCO Convention, with insights into the legal framework, see O'Keefe 2000.

¹⁹ United Nations 2008.

²⁰ Message 2022.

²¹ Message 2006.

Case study 1: The Goddess of Butrint and Italian–Albanian cultural diplomacy (1982)

The Goddess of Butrint (no. inv. 1227) is a renowned marble head discovered in 1929 at the archaeological site of Butrint, Albania, by the Italian Archaeological Mission led by Luigi Maria Ugolini.²² Its excavation marked a defining moment in the Italian exploration of Albania's ancient past, an endeavor deeply embedded in the fascist regime's broader project of cultural imperialism. The mission sought not only to uncover material traces of the Greco-Roman world, but to inscribe Italy's own historical legitimacy through archaeological stewardship beyond its borders. After its discovery, the sculpture's head was transferred to Italy (the sculpture's body remained in Albania)²³ under circumstances that have since been described as irregular; to defuse potential diplomatic tensions, the movement of the object was retroactively framed as a gift from King Zog I of Albania to Benito Mussolini and was moved to the Museo Nazionale Romano (MNR)²⁴ until the sculpture's return to Albania in 1982, and its current housing in the National Historical Museum in Tirana is a powerful case of how archaeological objects have been entangled in 20th-century narratives of nationalism,²⁵ diplomacy, and cultural legitimacy.²⁶

Unlike the more structured protocols surrounding international exhibitions or temporary loans, the movement of the Goddess of Butrint unfolded outside the formal mechanisms of museum governance. It was not a curatorial initiative, but rather a unilateral act of state diplomacy, shaped by Cold War geopolitics and enacted at the interministerial level. As such, it reveals a different mode of object circulation, one that bypassed museological discourse entirely in favor of strategic cultural gestures. Its repatriation in the early 1980s, though relatively quiet at the time, has since become emblematic of the complexities inherent in restitution processes,²⁷ particularly when heritage is mobilized not through legal claims or institutional negotiations but as an instrument of political exchange.

Sergio Romano, writing in *Corriere della Sera*, later confirmed the political nature of the transfer, detailing its evolution through parliamentary and diplomatic channels:

The story of the statue's return began in 1979 and was recounted in Parliament by Giuseppe Galasso, then Undersecretary for Cultural Heritage. In February of that year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage stating that “responsible Italian circles” had proposed the return of the head to Albania in the

²² Aurigemma 1963.

²³ Aurigemma 1963.

²⁴ Inv. 124679 from Museo Nazionale Romano archive.

²⁵ *Zëri i Popullit* was the official newspaper of the Albanian Party of Labour and served as a primary media outlet of the communist state during Enver Hoxha's regime and its immediate aftermath. As a state-controlled publication, it functioned both as a vehicle of ideological dissemination and as a curated record of national heritage narratives. While the newspaper did not document the diplomatic process of the Dea e Butrint's return from Italy, it referenced the statue multiple times between 1984 and 1990, treating it as an emblem of Albania's archaeological and cultural patrimony. These mentions, which include a radio program listing (1984), an archaeological commentary by Moikom Zeqo (1989), and a heritage travel feature (1990), reflect how the statue was discursively integrated into Albania's socialist-era identity and cultural pride. See: *Zëri i Popullit* 1984; Zeqo 1989; and *Zëri i Popullit* 1990.

²⁶ *Votra* magazine, which publishes essays and commentary on Albanian heritage and diaspora identity, describes the Dea di Butrinto as “more than an archaeological marvel; it is a cornerstone of Albania's cultural identity.” The article notes that its return to Albania in the 1980s, after decades abroad, represented “a significant moment in the preservation of national heritage and the reaffirmation of cultural sovereignty.” See *Votra Magazine* 2023.

²⁷ UNESCO 1970.

interest of developing cultural relations between the two countries. The Superintendent of Archaeology in Rome, Adriano La Regina, gave a favourable opinion for two reasons: first, that the head should be reunited with the body held in the museum in Butrint, and second, that such a gesture would demonstrate Italy's ethical consistency, especially as it called on other nations to stop illicitly acquiring Italian antiquities. The actual ceremony took place in Tirana on 15 January 1982.²⁸

Romano concludes that “even in this case, culture went hand in hand with politics,” suggesting that the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party) foreign policy and Cold War diplomacy likely informed the gesture.

While the act itself was carried out discreetly, its afterlife erupted years later. In September 1989, an article in the Italian national newspaper *Il Tempo* accused Italian authorities of handing over the sculpture without documentation or due process, framing the transfer as a form of institutional malpractice. The Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma (Superintendency of Archaeology of Rome), Adriano La Regina, responded forcefully and publicly. In an official clarification dated 4 September 1989, La Regina emphasized that the transfer was not a curatorial decision but rather “un atto di Governo promosso dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri nel 1979, concordato con il Ministro per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, e realizzato secondo le determinazioni di detto Ministero”²⁹ (A government act promoted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1979, agreed upon with the Minister for Cultural and Environmental Heritage, and carried out in accordance with the determinations of that Ministry). He underscored that the Goddess of Butrint had been delivered formally by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1982, not by the museum or the superintendency, and pointed to two parliamentary inquiries, filed by On. Battistuzzi in 1983 and 1984, that had already addressed the matter.

What emerges is a case that places the museum at the edge of its own collections. The superintendency, while nominally responsible for the sculpture, was neither the initiator nor the executor of its movement. Instead, the action was conducted at the interministerial level, aligning with broader diplomatic objectives during a period when Albania remained politically isolated from both Western Europe and the Soviet Bloc. In this sense, the Dea di Butrinto repatriation constitutes a gesture of cultural diplomacy in the Cold War era, an instance in which heritage functioned not as a static national possession but as a movable asset in international negotiation.

Equally significant is the temporality of the controversy. The sculpture was returned in 1982, but media and institutional responses did not fully materialize until seven years later. This delay highlights the asynchronous relationship between political action, museum governance, and public discourse. In responding to press accusations, La Regina was not just defending his institution; he was also reasserting the legal and diplomatic frameworks that authorized the transfer. In his response to *Il Tempo* and *Corriere della Sera*, the superintendency reaffirmed that “la consegna della scultura allo Stato albanese è stata effettuata formalmente, per il Governo italiano, dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri,” (The handover of the sculpture to the Albanian state was carried out formally, on behalf of the Italian government, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) shifting the burden of accountability to the state itself.

²⁸ Original Italian: “La storia della sua restituzione cominciò nel 1979 [...] Il ministero degli Esteri aveva scritto al ministero dei Beni culturali nel febbraio di quell'anno che ‘ambienti responsabili italiani’ proponevano la restituzione della testa all'Albania nell'interesse dello sviluppo delle relazioni culturali dei due Paesi [...] La cerimonia di consegna, come ho detto, ebbe luogo più tardi, a Tirana, il 15 gennaio 1982.” See Romano 2008.

²⁹ La Regina 1989.

The Goddess of Butrint case complicates conventional understandings of restitution.³⁰ It was not the result of a legal claim, a provenance investigation, or activist pressure. Rather, it was a preemptive political act, undertaken not in response to institutional failure but as a tool of soft diplomacy. For the MNR, it serves as a case study in the limits of curatorial agency under the authority of the state. For the broader museum system, it exemplifies how the movement of objects (even those no longer in the collection) can continue to activate institutional memory, media scrutiny, and administrative defense. The head was immediately placed in a place of honor in the archeology pavilion of the National History Museum in Tirana, where it merited the admiration of numerous visitors.³¹

The repatriation of the Goddess of Butrint in 1982 did not go unnoticed in Italy's public discourse, even several years after the event. A 1989 article in *La Repubblica*, titled "Quella Venere Gheddafi se la sogna," used the Butrint case to frame a broader debate about cultural property claims, particularly in response to Libya's demand for the restitution of the *Venere di Cirene*.³² The article juxtaposes the two cases, but only to firmly discredit the latter, both legally and morally, while reaffirming the former as justified. Libya's claim, journalist Clara Valenziano notes, "non ha nessuna consistenza" because the *Venere* was removed during colonial rule and prior to Libya's existence as a state. By contrast, the restitution of the head of the goddess is described as both scientifically and ethically necessary: "in Albania era stato commesso un vero atto vandalico: era stata decapitata una statua. Per farne omaggio a Mussolini, quella testa era stata separata dal suo tronco."

This selective framing reveals how Italian restitution discourse in the late twentieth century was shaped less by legal consistency than by symbolic and political considerations. In this case, the rejoining of the head and the body was seen not only as a scholarly correction but also as a distancing gesture from the violence of the fascist period. At the same time, the article critiques the broader ecosystem of illicit circulation and international acquisitions, particularly in Germany, France, and eastern Europe. Museums in Berlin, Munich, and Copenhagen are named as institutions housing works that were removed from Italy under questionable conditions, including Etruscan vases from Vulci and terracottas from Cerveteri. The Berlin Museum is highlighted for possessing a stolen Roman sarcophagus from Ostia and for recently inaugurating a gallery of newly acquired Apulian ceramics, prompting the article's final rhetorical question: "È tutto legale, ma non è un'espropriazione anche questa?"

That closing line captures a growing discomfort, even in mainstream Italian media, with the unequal dynamics of cultural property exchange. It also underscores the unresolved tensions between formal legality and historical accountability. While the Goddess of Butrint could be narratively framed as a necessary act of restitution, other claims (especially those made by formerly colonized nations) were categorically dismissed. This asymmetry points to the political calculus embedded in cultural heritage policy, where decisions about what is returned, and to whom, often reflect broader narratives of national identity, legitimacy, and control.

Case study 2: Indigenous-led repatriation in Canada

The repatriation of Indigenous cultural belongings in Canada unfolds within a markedly different legal and political context than the Goddess of Butrint case. Rather than being

³⁰ Buzi's analysis interprets the statue as a fusion of Themis and Apollo – symbols of Augustan ideology – implying that the head was repurposed to serve a political-religious message during the Roman imperial period. See Buzi 2018.

³¹ Stamati 2008.

³² Valenziano 1989.

driven by intergovernmental diplomacy, these efforts are shaped by Indigenous communities themselves, whose claims to cultural sovereignty have been bolstered by evolving legal standards and political recognition.³³ In recent decades, Canadian institutions have begun to respond to longstanding demands for the return of ancestral remains, ceremonial objects, and culturally sensitive materials.

Unlike centralized, treaty-based repatriations between states, Indigenous repatriation in Canada operates in a fragmented landscape shaped by federalism, institutional discretion, and the absence of comprehensive national legislation. While the 2007 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) legislated federally in 2021, affirms Indigenous rights to repatriation (notably in Article 12), its implementation in Canada has been incremental and subject to institutional interpretation.³⁴ Article 12 clearly states that “States shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with Indigenous peoples concerned.”

In practice, this means that repatriation efforts must often navigate a mosaic of local, provincial, and federal protocols, which may differ significantly in their responsiveness and legal force. The absence of a binding national repatriation law, comparable to the United States’ Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), has led to inconsistencies in how cultural institutions address claims.³⁵ Some institutions, such as national museums, have developed internal repatriation policies, while others rely on ad hoc negotiations. This institutional patchwork has placed the burden of proof, process, and coordination disproportionately on Indigenous communities. As Catherine Bell and Robert Paterson note, “Canada has not developed a uniform policy or legislative framework for repatriation, and the diversity of claims continues to outpace the ability of institutions to respond systematically.”³⁶

At the same time, Indigenous peoples in Canada assert repatriation not as a benevolent act of return but as a right rooted in their inherent sovereignty and international recognition. Legal frameworks emerging from Canadian constitutional law, particularly Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, which recognizes and affirms existing Indigenous rights and interact with international norms to support this position.³⁷ Yet implementation depends on political will, institutional accountability, and the willingness to accept Indigenous legal orders as authoritative in their own right.³⁸ Ruth Phillips emphasizes this shift, writing “museums must understand themselves not only as sites of public memory but as platforms for Indigenous cultural revitalization.”³⁹

This broader context reveals a dynamic interplay between domestic legal pluralism, transnational normative frameworks, and community-driven cultural resurgence. In contrast to heritage diplomacy between states, Indigenous-led repatriation engages questions of jurisdiction, recognition, and power redistribution. It reflects not only historical justice but also the remaking of institutional authority in line with evolving understandings of cultural sovereignty. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action 67 further reinforces this imperative, urging the Canadian Museums Association to undertake a

³³ Phillips 2011.

³⁴ *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, S.C. 2021, c. 14; *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 2008, pp. 5, 9. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.

³⁵ Bell and Paterson 2009.

³⁶ Bell and Paterson 2009.

³⁷ Constitution Act, 1982, s. 35, being Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (UK), 1982, c. 11.

³⁸ Borrows and Friedland 2022.

³⁹ Phillips 2011.

national review of museum policies and practices⁴⁰ to ensure compliance with UNDRIP and support Indigenous self-determination.⁴¹

Institutional practice and Indigenous agency

One of the earliest and most significant community-led repatriations in Canada was the return of potlatch regalia to the U'mista Cultural Centre and the Kwagiulth Museum beginning in 1979.⁴² These objects had been confiscated under the Canadian federal Potlatch Ban and were repatriated after sustained advocacy from community leaders, notably Gloria Cranmer Webster. As Webster described at the time, “It will be as if those masks and other treasures are U'mista. They're coming home to us,”⁴³ capturing the deep emotional and cultural significance of the return for the Kwakwaka'wakw people. This case set a national precedent for community-based cultural resurgence and remains a foundational example of Indigenous-led repatriation in Canada.

This section focuses specifically on the Rainy River First Nations (RRFN)–Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) repatriation process as a representative case of contemporary Indigenous-led returns in Canada. The landmark case is the 2018 return by the ROM of more than 100 ancestral remains and 5,000 associated funerary objects to RRFN. The process was guided by community protocols and framed not as a restitution of misappropriated property but as the reaffirmation of nation-to-nation diplomatic relationships. In a video documenting the ceremony, Dr. Craig Cipolla (curator of North American archaeology at the ROM) offered insight into the process, noting that “the process started in 2016 when the RRFN reached out to us and began the dialogue about what was going to happen. The official request was made, I believe, in early 2017 and was approved in summer 2017 and then we've been just discussing the mechanics of how it's going to work, the pragmatics of it, and now it's happened.”⁴⁴ This comment explains the long-term, dialogic nature of the collaboration, which emphasized relationship-building and logistical care. The ROM didn't only authorize the return; it engaged in sustained consultation, coordinating the reburial in alignment with RRFN protocol.

Marcel Medicine Horton, a community member present at the ceremony, described the significance of intergenerational participation, noting: “It was a beautiful ceremony and the kids to some extent probably don't even know what they're doing, but when they're 50 years old, they're going to remember this day as part of their bringing back the spirits, putting them in the ground where they rightly should have never ever been taken from. It's one of the most significant days in the history of our community.”⁴⁵ His words emphasize that repatriation was not simply an act of return but a ceremonial and pedagogical event, one that reaffirmed cultural sovereignty while embedding historical memory in the next generation.

As the ROM stated, “This project and the long-term relationship that is being forged between the ROM and RRFN are being built on a foundation of trust and transparency.”⁴⁶ This model signals a fundamental shift in how cultural institutions understand their

⁴⁰ Canadian Museums Association 2022.

⁴¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015.

⁴² Knight 2013.

⁴³ Gloria Cranmer Webster as quoted in Kenneth Olin and U'mista Cultural Society, *U'mista: The Return of the Masks* (1983), as cited in Knight 2013, p. 91.

⁴⁴ HOMETV 2019. HOMETV is a community-based media outlet serving Northwestern Ontario. Founded in 2017, it produces locally rooted news and cultural content for rural and Indigenous communities. See <https://hometvonline.ca/about/>.

⁴⁵ HOMETV 2019.

⁴⁶ Canadian Archaeological Association 2018.

responsibilities, not as owners but as temporary custodians of sovereign objects.⁴⁷ These repatriation processes resonate with what Moira Simpson has described as a form of restorative justice. Rather than viewing returns simply as acts of institutional accountability, Simpson highlights their role in cultural healing and intergenerational resilience. “For many Indigenous peoples,” she writes, “the return of cultural heritage is part of a wider process of cultural revitalization, spiritual healing, and social justice.”⁴⁸ These practices not only restore cultural patrimony but also support the reactivation of customary legal and ceremonial systems, reaffirming Indigenous nations as self-determining agents.

In a related case, the ROM in 2023 returned a ceremonial pipe and saddlebag to the Poundmaker Cree Nation. What made this act notable was not only the nature of the objects but the decision to return them directly to the great-great-granddaughter of Chief Poundmaker, in alignment with Poundmaker Cree law.⁴⁹ Here, repatriation intersects with lineage-based authority, suggesting a broader transformation in how repatriation practices are being shaped by Indigenous customary law rather than institutional protocols alone.

Another significant example is the repatriation of a large pictographic rock slab by the Sault Ste. Marie Museum to Temagami First Nation (Bear Island). Although the slab never left Canadian territory, its return was described as international “in a cultural sense,” demonstrating how Indigenous sovereignty reframes jurisdictional boundaries.⁵⁰ These cases show that repatriation is not solely about correcting historical wrongs but about supporting ongoing political relationships grounded in cultural diplomacy, law, and mutual recognition.

The example of the return from the ROM to the RRFN is a notable example because the process, while not mandated by national legislation, was carried out through dialogue grounded in respect, consent, and community protocols, marking a significant shift in how repatriation is framed by institutions and Indigenous nations alike.⁵¹

What distinguished this case was the formal recognition of RRFN as sovereign stewards of the returned cultural materials. The ROM publicly acknowledged that the repatriation was guided not by institutional policy alone but “on a foundation of trust and transparency,” affirming the nation-to-nation relationship that structured the return.⁵² The reburial of the ancestors and sacred objects, reported in local press, was described by RRFN as a restorative act of “bringing our people home” that aligned with ceremonial law and cultural resurgence.⁵³

This case illustrates how repatriation has moved beyond the custodial paradigm and into the realm of diplomatic relationship-building, one in which museums engage with Indigenous nations as political and cultural authorities. Unlike the Goddess of Butrint case, which was executed by interministerial decree, the RRFN–ROM return emerged from collaborative consultation and emphasized ethical accountability over legal obligation. In this context, museums are not merely responding to restitution claims but participating in the affirmation of Indigenous legal orders and epistemologies.

⁴⁷ See Peers and Brown 2003; the editors and contributors argue that sustained collaboration with source communities fundamentally transforms institutional practices, placing emphasis on reciprocity, shared authority, and culturally grounded stewardship.

⁴⁸ Simpson 2009.

⁴⁹ Iannelli 2025.

⁵⁰ Iannelli 2025.

⁵¹ See Canadian Archaeological Association 2018; Royal Ontario Museum and Rainy River First Nations. *Joint Statement on Repatriation*, 30 November 2021.

⁵² Canadian Archaeological Association 2018; Royal Ontario Museum and Rainy River First Nations. *Joint Statement on Repatriation*, 30 November 2021.

⁵³ Odrowski 2019.

Furthermore, the RRFN case exemplifies a contemporary model of repatriation shaped by the principles of UNDRIP, particularly Article 12, which affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to repatriate ceremonial objects and human remains “through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with Indigenous peoples concerned.”⁵⁴ Although UNDRIP was legislated federally in Canada in 2021, its implementation remains diffuse. The ROM’s cooperation with RRFN signals an institutional willingness to exceed legal minimums and build new ethical standards in response to Indigenous leadership.

Comparative reflections: Divergent paths, shared stakes

The preceding case studies illustrate two markedly different trajectories of cultural repatriation: one rooted in Cold War–era intergovernmental diplomacy (the Goddess of Butrint) and the other in the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty and legal pluralism within a settler-colonial framework (Canada). Yet despite their divergences in structure, temporality, and institutional context, both cases illuminate how museums increasingly operate as political actors embedded within broader frameworks of sovereignty, accountability, and historical reconciliation.

In the Italian–Albanian context, the repatriation of the Goddess of Butrint was orchestrated at the ministerial level, framed as a symbolic correction of fascist-era violence but ultimately enacted as a unilateral gesture of diplomacy. The MNR, though nominally responsible for the object, was ultimately bypassed,⁵⁵ exposing the limitations of curatorial authority when repatriation is governed by interministerial logic. In contrast, repatriation in Canada has emerged through decades of Indigenous political mobilization, legislative recognition, and institutional transformation. Canadian museums, particularly since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, are not just implementing state directives but engaging in ethical negotiations that recognize Indigenous nations as legal and diplomatic counterparts.⁵⁶

These cases do more than demonstrate procedural differences; they articulate fundamentally different political imaginaries. Comparing them allows us to reflect on the evolution of repatriation practices as historical phenomena. The Italian–Albanian example occurred in 1981–82, during a period when international returns were still relatively rare and largely unstructured. As Bouchenaki notes, “the 1970 Convention marked a milestone in defining the legal and ethical principles governing the return of cultural property, but for many years, restitution remained largely dependent on diplomatic negotiation and the goodwill of States.”⁵⁷ This captures the context in which the Goddess of Butrint was returned, operating more as a cultural overture than under any binding legal obligation. Italy had ratified the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property through Law No. 873/1978, which entered into force on 2 January 1979. Yet at the time of the Goddess of Butrint’s return, legal and institutional mechanisms for repatriation were still in their early stages.⁵⁸ As noted by Lyndel V. Prott and Patrick J. O’Keefe, the 1970s and early 1980s marked a formative stage in the codification of cultural property norms, with few precedents or

⁵⁴ United Nations 2008, p. 9.

⁵⁵ It is important to note that from 1976 to 2004, the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma was headed by Adriano La Regina, who served as the principal authority over the Museo Nazionale Romano, which at the time was not autonomous but operated as part of the soprintendenza.

⁵⁶ Tünsmeier 2023.

⁵⁷ Bouchenaki 2009, p. 139.

⁵⁸ UNESCO 1970.

established mechanisms guiding interstate returns.⁵⁹ In this sense, the Goddess of Butrint's return was both anomalous and symbolically charged, a signal of shifting cultural diplomacy even in the absence of legal obligation. This occurred nearly a decade before Italian cultural institutions began developing voluntary guidelines for restitution, such as the *Carta del Ritorno* (1991), which emphasized the ethical imperative of returning objects to their communities or places of origin.⁶⁰ As Stefano De Caro reflects on Italy's later restitution practices, "The diplomatic and legal work had found important cultural support in the form of collaboration with universities in the US and other countries ... [who] did not recognize themselves in the predatory politics of the great 'art' Museums."⁶¹ These alliances would come to characterize Italy's more assertive and morally framed heritage diplomacy in the 2000s. In contrast, the Canadian cases examined here are deeply contemporary, unfolding in the 2020s within a context shaped by international human rights frameworks, Indigenous sovereignty movements, and decades of museum reform. Yet despite the institutional and temporal gulf separating them, both examples show that repatriation (regardless of legal regime) remains a powerful mode of affirming nationhood and addressing historical harm. These shifts align with broader redefinitions of what a museum is and does. As Sandahl notes, ICOM's evolving definition acknowledges that museums are no longer neutral repositories but politically and ethically engaged institutions.⁶² The inclusion of Albania as a case study is also instructive in geopolitical terms. At the time of the repatriation in 1982, Albania remained one of the most politically isolated countries in Europe, governed under a rigid communist regime.⁶³ It would not begin its transition out of communism until the early 1990s, culminating in the abolition of the People's Socialist Republic on 29 April 1991.⁶⁴ Albania is not a member of the European Union today, though it is actively pursuing accession and, as of October 2024, has expressed its goal of becoming fully prepared for EU membership by 2030.⁶⁵ Albania's cultural heritage initiatives have increasingly been positioned as part of its Europeanization strategy. As a 2020 UN Development Programme (UNDP) report underscores, projects aimed at protecting and enhancing archaeological sites and cultural infrastructure are understood not merely as acts of preservation, but as integral to articulating Albania's uniqueness and relevance within the broader European project.¹⁷ This framing lends retrospective significance to acts like the Goddess of Butrint's return, which can now be read as early signals of cultural alignment, even before Albania formally embarked on the EU accession path.⁶⁶ This is an example of how repatriation can unfold both

⁵⁹ Prott and O'Keefe 1992.

⁶⁰ The *Carta del Ritorno* (Return Charter) is a nonbinding ethical guideline developed in 1991 through the collaboration of ICOM Italia (the Italian National Committee of the International Council of Museums), the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (Italian Library Association), and the Associazione Nazionale Archivistica Italiana (National Association of Italian Archivists). This charter was established to encourage Italian cultural institutions to voluntarily return cultural artifacts to their communities or countries of origin, emphasizing ethical responsibility over legal obligation. It emerged in response to growing international discourse on cultural property restitution and aimed to set a precedent for proactive repatriation efforts within Italy. While the *Carta del Ritorno* does not hold legal authority, it has been influential in shaping the policies and practices of Italian museums and cultural institutions regarding the restitution of cultural property. It reflects a broader commitment to cultural diplomacy and ethical stewardship of cultural heritage.

⁶¹ De Caro 2024, p. 596.

⁶² See Sandahl 2019, Sandahl argues that the museum's role is evolving to include social responsibility, ethical engagement, and community accountability, especially in light of debates on decolonization and restitution.

⁶³ Fischer 1999. This book explains the authoritarian and isolationist policies under Enver Hoxha and situates Albania's global position through the 1980s.

⁶⁴ Vickers 1999, where Vickers details Albania's political reforms, the end of single-party rule, and the formal dissolution of the socialist state.

⁶⁵ Sinoruka 2024.

⁶⁶ The UNDP's 2020 report *Culture and Heritage: A Bridge Between Communities* outlines how Albania's cultural heritage sector is being leveraged to foster social cohesion and contribute to EU integration goals. The report

within and beyond supranational political frameworks. In this context, the return of the Goddess of Butrint can be read not only as a diplomatic gesture by the Italian state but as a recognition of Albania's cultural sovereignty during a period when its political sovereignty was contested or marginalized on the European stage. At the same time, the Canadian examples reveal a very different but equally significant aspiration: not accession to a supranational body but formal recognition of Indigenous sovereignty within and alongside an existing settler-colonial state. This juxtaposition highlights how repatriation can serve divergent political goals, whether to signal readiness for international integration or to affirm the legitimacy of nonstate nations within an entrenched federal framework.

The Goddess of Butrint case reasserted postwar Italian nationhood by selectively acknowledging fascist-era injustices while carefully delimiting the boundaries of accountability. It was an act of reconciliation through state sovereignty, designed to symbolically distance the republic from its colonial past. By contrast, Indigenous-led repatriation in Canada foregrounds a multivalent notion of sovereignty: one in which museums are called upon to mediate between legal orders, ethical obligations, and competing claims to nationhood. These repatriations are not only acts of return but also gestures of recognition, of Indigenous self-determination, memory systems, and the right to narrate history on one's own terms.

Looked at together, these examples show how repatriation is more than a matter of property; it is a sociopolitical tool for the negotiation of legitimacy, redress, and belonging. In both cases, objects are mobilized not only to resolve past injustices but to perform and recalibrate collective identities. Museums, as intermediaries in these exchanges, become sites through which postcolonial and pluricultural futures are negotiated.⁶⁷ Their participation in repatriation reveals a growing expectation that cultural institutions engage not only in the preservation of heritage but in the performance of justice, one rooted in Cold War-era intergovernmental diplomacy (Goddess of Butrint) and the other in the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty and legal pluralism within a settler-colonial framework (Canada). Yet despite their divergences in structure, temporality, and institutional context, both reveal how museums function as intermediaries in political processes that exceed the boundaries of curatorship.

In the Italian-Albanian context, the repatriation of the Goddess of Butrint was orchestrated at the ministerial level, framed as a symbolic correction of fascist-era violence but ultimately executed as a top-down gesture of diplomacy. The MNR, while nominally responsible for the object, was ultimately bypassed, revealing the limited agency of museums in state-driven cultural politics. In contrast, repatriation in Canada has emerged through decades of Indigenous advocacy, constitutional recognition, and institution-level adaptation. Canadian museums, especially since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, are not merely implementing state policy but negotiating relationships with Indigenous nations, often under the principles of mutual consent and customary law.

This contrast reveals a structural shift in the governance of cultural heritage. Where the Goddess of Butrint's repatriation was anchored in a logic of state-to-state sovereignty, Indigenous-led repatriation in Canada destabilizes the singularity of state authority. It proposes a hybrid system of cultural jurisdiction in which museums must recognize

emphasizes that preserving and promoting archaeological sites and museum infrastructure is seen not only as a means of local development but as a strategic asset for articulating Albania's distinct identity within Europe. The program was implemented by UNDP and UNESCO on behalf of the government of Albania, with financial support from the government of Spain. See United Nations Development Programme 2020.

⁶⁷ As Tony Bennett argues, museums have historically operated as "political technologies," not merely reflecting political ideologies but actively producing social order and citizen-subjects through their exhibitionary practices. See Bennett 1995, pp. 59–61, 94–97, 203–05.

nonstate actors as legitimate rights holders and diplomatic partners. While the Butrinto case was framed as exceptional and politically unrepeatable, Canadian repatriation efforts increasingly represent a normative horizon, albeit one still marked by institutional inconsistency and legal ambiguity.

Both cases, however, affirm that repatriation is not only a matter of returning objects but of renegotiating institutional legitimacy, cultural authorship, and historical accountability. In each, museums serve as stages where broader questions of justice, memory, and international cooperation are performed. What distinguishes them is not the presence or absence of politics but the kinds of sovereignty they engage and the modes of dialogue they enable. Both cases ultimately reaffirm the utility of repatriation as a sociopolitical tool not only for repairing fractured historical relationships but for advancing broader processes of recognition, reconciliation, and cultural legitimacy, whether between states or between nations within states.⁶⁸

This comparative analysis of the Goddess of Butrint's return to Albania in the early 1980s and contemporary Indigenous-led repatriation efforts in Canada highlights the evolving role of museums as active participants in the negotiation of cultural sovereignty and historical justice. Despite differing in temporal, legal, and geopolitical contexts, both cases exemplify how repatriation serves not merely as the restitution of cultural artifacts but as a potent instrument for affirming nationhood and facilitating sociopolitical reconciliation.

The Goddess of Butrint case, occurring during Albania's period of political isolation under a communist regime, illustrates how repatriation can function as a diplomatic gesture, acknowledging cultural sovereignty even amid broader geopolitical tensions. Conversely, Canada's ongoing repatriation processes, driven by Indigenous communities and supported by evolving legal frameworks, reflect a shift toward recognizing the multiplicity of sovereignties and the importance of engaging with diverse legal and cultural paradigms within a settler-colonial context.

These instances reveal that repatriation is deeply embedded in the politics of belonging, serving as a mechanism through which communities and nations assert their identities, address historical grievances, and negotiate their positions within broader political structures. Museums are increasingly positioned not just as custodians of cultural heritage but as dynamic spaces where dialogues about identity, history, and justice are actively constructed and contested.

Looking ahead, the role of museums in repatriation processes will likely continue to expand, necessitating a critical examination of their practices and policies. As nations like Albania pursue integration into broader political entities such as the European Union, and as Indigenous communities in countries like Canada continue to assert their rights and sovereignties, the imperative for museums to engage ethically and collaboratively in repatriation efforts becomes ever more pronounced. This exemplifies the need for ongoing scholarly attention to the intersections of museum practices, cultural diplomacy, and the politics of recognition.

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⁶⁸ For a detailed discussion of how repatriation operates as a sociopolitical instrument of recognition in the Canadian context, see Iannelli 2025. The article argues that repatriation should be understood as an international issue grounded in Indigenous sovereignty and aligned with frameworks such as UNDRIP. It includes case studies such as the return of human remains to the Rainy River First Nations and critically examines the challenges of framing Indigenous communities as "nations" within museum discourse.

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