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To cite this article: Jenny Kidd (2017): Debating contemporary museum ethics: reporting Sekhemka, International Journal of Heritage Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13527258.2017.1287119](https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1287119)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1287119>



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Published online: 08 Feb 2017.



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Debating contemporary museum ethics: reporting Sekhemka

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ABSTRACT

The sale by Northampton Borough Council (UK) of the Egyptian Sekhemka statue at auction house Christie's became a key focus of international debate about contemporary museum ethics in 2015–2016. A decision to deaccession and dispose of a museum object would not traditionally be the subject of intense media scrutiny, but the case of Sekhemka was widely reported in local, national and international press. This article takes as its start point the question 'What did media reporting of the sale of Sekhemka reveal about contemporary museum ethics, and the terms of their debate?' It reports findings from a content and discourse analysis of 229 news stories dating from late 2012 when the sale was first proposed, to May 2016 when it was reported that in all probability the Sekhemka statue had finally left the country. The ambiguous and intriguing sale of Sekhemka might not be the last as global economic and geopolitical circumstances continue to impact our valuations and uses of cultural heritage. This paper demonstrates that we would do well to keep media reporting of such events under close scrutiny in the interests of a considered and informed contemporary museum ethics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 September 2016
Accepted 23 January 2017

KEYWORDS

Ethics; museums; Sekhemka; heritage; discourse

The July 2014 sale of a Sekhemka statue at auction house Christie's in London quickly become a key focus of international debate about contemporary museum ethics. Valued by Christie's at £4–6 million, the statue eventually sold for an unprecedented £15.76 million to an anonymous buyer.¹ Originally gifted to Northampton Museums by the 4th Marquess of Northampton in approximately 1880, Sekhemka was sold by the Conservative-run Northampton Borough Council (NBC) in order to help fund a £14 million planned extension of the Museum and Art Gallery's premises.² The wider UK context for the sale was a cultural sector disproportionately impacted by the politics of austerity. Local councils in particular had struggled to justify continued financial support for local arts and heritage provision, and not just in Northampton.

A story about the decision to deaccession and dispose of a work of cultural heritage would not traditionally be the subject of intense media scrutiny, but the case of Sekhemka seemed to work against that trend. The details were reported in the local press as might be expected given the circumstances of the sale, but also received national and international coverage. The story was appealing for a number of reasons: there was a conflict at its core and it made reference to elite persons (and institutions) one of whom – the buyer – was curiously invisible. It might be considered a rather ambiguous story, much as any that has ethics at its core: the rights and wrongs were open to interpretation, and the

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implications of the sale unclear. Yet its overarching frames rendered it a ‘bad news’ story: historically tantalising in terms of news values (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O’Neill 2001).

The intricacies of that reporting have remained unexamined however and raise significant questions with regard to the field of museum ethics. What did reporting reveal about who got to debate – even determine – what was considered ethical or unethical museums practice in that case? What sources were relied on in reporting? What discourses and frames were activated within the coverage? Such questions matter because the media have an agenda-setting role, and can influence in quite profound ways the terms of debate on a particular topic (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs 2005). They prioritise and legitimise certain frames, perspectives and discourses whilst quietly side-lining others and as such are consequential (Foucault 1980; Hall 1997). This research takes as its start point the following question: What did reporting of the sale of Sekhemka reveal about contemporary museum ethics, and the terms of their debate?

The article begins with an introduction to debates within the scholarly literature about museum and heritage ethics, debates that have themselves seen renewed verve and vigour since the Sekhemka sale. It then looks at the sale of Sekhemka in more detail, outlines the methodology for the study, and introduces findings from the analysis. As the politics of austerity continue in and beyond the UK we may see many more such cases, and this article demonstrates that we would do well to keep related media reporting under close scrutiny in the interests of a considered and informed public debate about contemporary museum ethics.

Debating museum ethics

Ethics has been an area of examination in the museum and heritage studies literature since the 1980s, but has seen renewed scrutiny in recent years (Marstine 2011; Sandis 2014). This is allied to a number of key recent developments: the post-2008 economic climate within which cultural policy and funding decisions are hotly contested; the emphasis on social justice and radical transparency in the twenty-first century museum (Marstine 2011); questions raised by digitisation with regard to authorship, ownership, and the circulation of data about institutions, collections, and visitors themselves (Kidd 2014; Kidd and Cardiff 2017); and continued debates about repatriation, and about the destruction and looting of cultural property (not least in Iraq, Syria and Turkey). Museum practice has been critically examined along a number of trajectories and makes for an ‘ethical landscape of great complexity’ (Brown 2014, 178). That practice can be ambiguous and, as Constantine Sandis reminds us, ‘not always good’ (Sandis 2014, 20). A number of museum scholars have proposed that it is especially the relationship between museums and the marketplace for objects that has become problematic in recent years, and the Sekhemka case would seem to attest to this (Henning 2006; Janes 2009).

Renewed emphasis on ethics is appropriate given that they are at the core of museums’ work, referring as they do to ‘the values on which museums found their operations’ (Papaioannou 2013, 1). Tomislav Sola has said that ‘the entire museological concept begins with two questions: “What?” and “For Whom?”’ and reminds us that ‘both questions are ethical issues’ (Sola, 1997, 170). Indeed, he notes, ‘Everything done in museums and related institutions brings ethical consequences and everything said about museums or put into written form is an ethical statement, sometimes imbued with the power of law’ (Sola 1997, 172). There are important distinctions indicated here between ethical and legal responsibilities, and between ethics as a ‘way of thinking’ and as a professional code (Sola 1997, 170). Signing up to a code of ethics is not the same as *being* ethical. Distinctions between ethical and unethical actions are not always easily discernible in practice: the two are not dichotomous. As Schmidt notes, ‘ethics are not based on any measurable systems or data, they are not scientifically verifiable’ (Schmidt 1992, 258, see also Kimmel 1998). Ethics alter over time as our grounds for making judgements shift, and as our understandings of our rights and responsibilities as a globalised citizenry bend and flex. This is a huge challenge given that as Nina Simon has reminded us, museums are ‘institutions rooted in permanence’ (2015), struggling to overcome what Robert Janes calls the ‘tyranny of tradition’ (Janes 2009, 14).

All of the above challenges notwithstanding, museums have operated with professional codes of ethics since early in the twentieth century, the first being the American Association of Museums Code launched in 1925 (Bounia 2014). Such codes provide benchmarks for professional decision-making and as such inform ‘an acceptable museum practice’ (Edson 1997, 10). Alexandra Bounia states that they ‘refer to the practice of employing ethical principles to everyday museum work’ (2014, 1) and Gary Edson grounds that substantively: ‘Every administrative, curatorial, public relations, and fund raising decision includes the possibility of an inappropriate or unacceptable action’ (Edson 1997, 10).

Museum codes are not legal documents. Rather, they operate through peer pressure, with not insignificant penalties such as loss of accreditation and/or a ban from a museums association if an institution is seen to fall foul. Bounia contends that the ‘professional isolation’ that can be effected as a result might ‘bring embarrassment and shame’ even at a personal level (Bounia 2014, 1), but whether those sanctions represent sufficient deterrents has been questioned, as will be seen in this article.

Code of Ethics documents, according to Fenna Schmidt need to be ‘constantly’ updated in order to stay relevant (1992, 259). It is notable that the codes for both the International Council of Museums and the UK’s Museums Association (MA) have been re-worked in recent years (2013 and 2015a respectively), and in 2014 the UK MA Disposal Toolkit was also revised. Janet Marstine observed in 2011 that, against a backdrop of financial pressures on the sector, museums were ‘writing, reviewing and tightening’ their codes, and legal intervention as a supplement to the above sanctions was being ‘considered more closely’ (Marstine 2011, xxiii). At that time, Marstine’s appraisal of that revision, and the wider context catalysing it, was that ‘the traditional museum ethics discourse ... [was] unable to meet the needs of museums and society in the twenty-first century’ (Marstine 2011, xxiii). Contemporary museum ethics needed to be, in Marstine’s assessment, ‘contingent’, ‘negotiated’, not exclusionary, open to risk, and both ‘adaptive and improvisational’ (2011, 8). To those who might counter that such an approach was ‘too porous’ or confusing, Marstine’s response was bold and sobering: ‘Ethics is never easy’ (Marstine 2011, 20).

The sale of Sekhemka

It is a matter of regret that the tomb of this Sekhemka is unknown; it might well contain fine reliefs, if one may judge from the quality of the statues provided for his burial. (James 1963, 12)

There is very little published work on the Northampton Sekhemka, aside from the 1963 article in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* cited above. How prophetic T.G.H James’ words turned out to be: Sekhemka proved to be a source of ‘fine reliefs’ indeed. There is one other Sekhemka in the Brooklyn Museum collection,³ but it has been much damaged over time, and as such has nothing like the same appeal to collectors. The Christie’s press release promoting the sale of the statue referred to the Northampton Sekhemka as ‘exceptional’ (Aitken 2014, 1). Georgiana Aitken, Director and Head of Antiquities at Christie’s London described it as ‘the most important Egyptian sculpture ever to come to market’ and reminded potential buyers that as the statue was over 4500 years old it’s near perfect condition was all the more remarkable (Aitken 2014, 1).

Tristram Besterman has written about the ethics of museums’ disposal, paying particular attention to its ‘most ethically contentious’ form, financially motivated disposal (1992, 34). His is an informative analysis given our interest here in the sale of Sekhemka. Besterman notes that

The motives that prompt the sale of collections fall into four main categories that: (i) generate cash for the governing body to deploy with no benefit to the museum; (ii) help to finance a museum capital project, such as the acquisition or construction of buildings; (iii) assist with defraying the running expenses of the museum: and (iv) provide a means of improving the collections. (Besterman 1992, 34)

He goes on to refer to these forms of ‘asset-stripping’ in turn as (1) Ripping off the Museum, (2) Selling for Bricks and Mortar, (3) Selling to Pay for Running Costs and (4) Selling to Buy (Besterman 1992, 34–36). In sum, he asserts, ‘Collections must never be treated as consumables, to trade in for other objects, running costs or buildings’ (Besterman 1992, 42). Geoffrey Lewis similarly asserts that

'Because museum collections are held in public trust they may not be treated as a realisable asset' (Lewis 2004, 9). Nevertheless, the Sekhemka disposal was a clear case of Selling for Bricks and Mortar. A statement from Northampton Borough Council (NBC) asserted that 'the money will be invested in a major extension of Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, which will double the size of the exhibition space and create new galleries, teaching facilities and commercial space' (NBC 2014, unpagged). Their intent was thus fairly unambiguous, although approximately £6 m from the eventual sale would go to the current Lord Northampton after his own intervention in the sale.

A look at the MA's Code of Ethics reveals the stance of the Association – the 'guardian of UK museum ethics' (MA 2015b, unpagged) – on such disposal, making much of the 'position of trust' that museums occupy in relation to their various users (MA 2015a, 2). Museums, the code states, should 'treat museum collections as cultural, scientific or historic assets, not financial assets' (MA, 2015a, 13), especially not assets to be sold to 'generate short-term revenue (for example to meet a budget deficit)' and asserts that 'financially motivated disposal risks damaging public confidence in museums' (MA, 2015a, 15). The MA also publishes a Disposal Toolkit which outlines in some detail cases in which disposal will be deemed unacceptable. These include disposal 'primarily for financial reasons', 'on an ad hoc basis', 'without considering expert advice', that would 'adversely affect the reputation of museums', that would 'not be in the long term interest' and where 'doing so would remove an item from the public domain' (MA 2014b, 3).⁴ On a number of these measures then the Sekhemka sale might be interpreted as unethical.

Geoffrey Lewis notes that where deaccessioning absolutely cannot be avoided there should 'be a strong presumption' that it will be offered first to other museums (2004, 9). Following the sale of Sekhemka, this presumption meant a temporary export bar was placed upon the statue by the UK Department for Culture Media and Sport, in recognition of both the gross under-estimation of the statue's eventual sale-price, and of sector-wide disapproval of the sale. It was hoped another museum or consortia of museums would find the £15.8 million now necessary in order to keep the statue in the UK. The Egyptian government also stepped in, setting up a fund to bring Sekhemka back to Egypt, making claims that it had been taken illegally in the first instance and that as such the sale was unacceptable. Such funds were not forthcoming, and on 6 April 2016 that export bar was lifted. As the papers widely reported, it was now highly unlikely that the Sekhemka statue would again find itself on public display.

There were a number of direct consequences of the sale. In October 2014 the MA barred Northampton Museums Service (NMS) from membership for a minimum of five years saying that the sale was a clear breach of its Code of Ethics. The MA's statement at the time asserted that

Northampton Borough Council had not demonstrated that the sale of Sekhemka was funding of last resort in relation to the development plans for the museum site. In addition, its plan to share the proceeds of the sale [with the 7th Marquess of Northampton] indicated that legal title of the object was not resolved. (MA 2014a, unpagged)

NMS had its accreditation removed by Arts Council England (ACE) and was advised it would no longer be eligible for support from The Art Fund. The service has since been judged ineligible for the Heritage Lottery funding it was seeking to support its redevelopment plans. This disappointing news for NBC was closely followed in January 2015 by another unwelcome bout of international attention when the (then) leader of the Council, David Mackintosh, was named Philistine of the Year in the satirical magazine *Private Eye*'s Rotten Borough Awards. *Private Eye* called the sale, and the arrangement with the Marquess of Northampton, nothing more than a 'shabby' deal (*Private Eye* quoted in BBC 2015a).

In March 2015 a joint statement on unethical disposal was issued by ACE, The National Archives, the Art Fund, the MA, the Association of Independent Museums, the National Museum Directors Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund, Museums Galleries Scotland, Northern Ireland Museums Council and the Federation of Museums and Art Galleries of Wales. Its message was unequivocal

As a group of the key funding, development and membership bodies for the museum sector, we are seriously concerned about cases of unethical sale from museum collections and the targeting of collections as a source of income. We believe this will erode the long-held and hard won trust that the public have in museums and will cause irreversible damage to the UK's cultural inheritance. (ACE et al. 2015, 1)

'We do not' they went on 'accept that unethical sale from museum collections is an effective solution to the greater challenges that museums face' (ACE et al. 2015, 1). Nevertheless, in May 2016 it was widely reported that the Sekhemka Statue had in all probability left the UK for either Qatar or the US.

The fact that the Northampton Sekhemka sold for so much more than its initial valuation is arguably one of the reasons why so much attention was paid to the story post-sale. Not only was it leaving the country and going into private ownership, but it was setting a precedent for other museums who might similarly find themselves in dire financial straits: a reminder that the market for antiquities was not only alive and well, but flourishing.⁵ Ben Miller of Culture 24 proposed that Sekhemka should be 'a huge wake-up call to the entire museums sector and the regulators of it' (Miller 2014, unpagged).

Methodology

This article introduces findings from an in-depth content and discourse analysis of reporting surrounding the sale of Sekhemka. It explores what media coverage can tell us about contemporary museum ethics and the terms of their public debate.

Using newspaper database Nexis 124 articles were identified that reported the Sekhemka case (with an isolated search term of 'Sekhemka'), the first from August 2012, and the latest from May 2016 when it was reported that the statue had in all probability left the UK. This included news reporting from the regional press such as the Northampton Chronicle and Echo, the national press in the UK, and the international press in English (including from Egypt, Iran, Sri Lanka, the USA and Australia). These reports were comprehensively coded alongside all BBC online news pieces on the sale and its aftermath, a further 40 news items. In addition, the research featured an analysis of all reporting from the UK Museums Association at that time both online and in the *Museums Journal*, the principle professional monthly publication for the sector in the UK, amounting to a further 33 articles. As already noted, the MA is the UK's professional association for the cultural sector, and is responsible for wording and upholding its Code of Ethics. Consequently various spokespeople for the MA became sources cited in news reporting.⁶

Each news report was coded along a number of key lines of enquiry. Firstly, for type of publication; local, national broadsheet, national tabloid or international.⁷ Secondly, for the key framing construct articulated for the sale; within debates about austerity, tourism or local redevelopment for example. All reports were then coded for sources used with the highest number of sources coded for one article being six.⁸ A source was classed as an individual or body contributing a direct quote that appeared in quotation marks within a news story. Each source was coded for their individual perspective on the ethics of the sale: as ethical, unethical or as part of a more complicated picture. Where the sale was understood to be unethical, the reasoning for that stance was also coded where discernible. Key lexical choices made in the reporting were coded. This was critical in order to analyse the larger discursive frameworks that were being activated.⁹

Alongside the above news reporting, a total of 32 blog posts by the Save Sekhemka Action Group (SSAG, <http://sekhemka.blogspot.co.uk/>) were analysed to establish how the frames of presentation and analysis differed within the campaigning discourse surrounding the sale. Here, SSAG represents the not insignificant grassroots activity that was aroused following news of the potential sale, activity which also included the 'Stop the Sale of Sekhemka by Northampton Council' petition on the campaigning website 38 Degrees.¹⁰

A total of 229 reports and posts were thus analysed in the study constituting as comprehensive a sample as was possible whilst limited to the English language.

Reporting Sekhemka

... the longest-running tragicomedy in the British art world ... [Sekhemka] seems to have survived the collapse of his own civilisation only to play a small non-speaking role in the collapse of ours. (Richard Morrison in *The Times*, 3 April 2015)

This section uses data from the analysis to examine the discourse circulating around the sale. It is followed by a more in depth appraisal of the issues raised by the coverage.

The Sekhemka news 'event' began with a small number of reports covering the initial valuation of the statue in 2012. A report in *The Sun* (18 August 2012) alluded to 'stunned museum bosses' who had just been informed that their statue was worth '£2MILLION'. This would of course turn out to be a significant under-estimation.¹¹ The story gained pace in local news reporting in 2013, before developing nationally in 2014 in the lead up to the sale. At the point Christie's Auction House started to be cited in reporting Sekhemka became an international news story, although their spokespeople remained ambivalent about the ethics of the sale.

The press sample was constituted of 45% local news stories, 25% UK broadsheet coverage, 6% UK tabloid coverage and 23% international coverage. Sekhemka thus became much more than a story about local heritage provision. The tabloid coverage, although seemingly diminutive, was noteworthy for a story ostensibly about the arts and culture. Council Leader Mary Markham recognised the international character of the debate when she said in a BBC News report in July 2015 that 'We did not expect the issue of the sale to go global' before adding that the Council would 'definitely do it again' regardless of the wholly negative attention the sale attracted overseas (BBC 2015b). The story as it unfolded in the Egyptian reporting in particular was one of a catastrophic series of breaches in ethical principles, from the acquisition by the Marquess in the first instance to the eventual sale by NBC.

Within the UK reporting the most tenacious judgements on the sale came from arts critics. Richard Morrison in *The Times* (14 September 2014) talked of 'selling off the family silver'; a refrain that recurs a number of times in the reporting. Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian* similarly designated it a clear case of 'selling out' (24 January 2013). Their assessments echo the language used by Tristram Besterman cited earlier in this article, a case of 'Selling for Bricks and Mortar' (1992, 42). These two critics were unequivocal in their condemnation of the sale, and of what it revealed about British attitudes towards arts and culture. Morrison concluded that 'these aren't good or enlightened times' and that the sale was a 'tragedy' (*The Times*, 14 September 2014). Jones asserted that 'The sale tells its own story – one of decline in intellectual ambition, cultural seriousness and global consciousness' (*The Guardian*, 24 January 2013). Much other reporting, as will be seen, was far more indeterminate in its appraisal of the ethics of the sale.

In reporting the reasoning for the sale, the most frequent justification given (proffered in 46% of stories) was the Council's own, that the funds would be used 'to help expand Northampton Museum and Gallery' (BBC 2014a). Interestingly given the broader context of the sale, austerity was not a key feature in the discussion, appearing in 7% of the reporting. This is important and perhaps consequential, the sale was not presented as a direct response to local or national arts policy but as very much a strategic move on behalf of NBC. Forty-four per cent of articles offered no rationale for the sale and none of the articles featured discussion about where else funding for culture could or should be coming from.

In 3% of the reporting NBC sources tried to justify the sale on the grounds that the statue 'doesn't help tell the story of the town' (BBC 2012a) and is not a 'key part' of the town's history (BBC 2012b). David Mackintosh (leader of the Council at the time) said on local evening news programme BBC Look East that the Sekhemka had 'never really been the centrepiece of our collection' (BBC 2014b). This was a line of argument Jonathan Jones fiercely rejected in *The Guardian* (24 January 2013)

How magical that Northampton should own a piece of this heritage; how great that its schoolchildren have access to a masterpiece of Egyptian sculpture without having to take a coach trip to the British Museum.

And how sad to squander that treasure, to rationalise selling a piece of timeless beauty to pay for navel-gazing local 'heritage'.

Richard Morrison in *The Times*, although less dismissive of the value of local heritage, agreed asking 'Why shouldn't Northampton have its own piece of antiquity?' (*The Times*, 14 September 2012). This was a minority perspective however. In most of the coverage the relationship between local, regional, national and international remains unexamined.

Table 1. Sources quoted in the coverage by frequency.

Source	Count
Tory Council spokesperson/leader	79
Museums Association	49
Save Sekhemka Action Group spokesperson	45
Arts Council England	33
Current Lord Northampton estate	24
Department of Culture Media and Sport spokesperson	19
Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities	18
Egyptian Ambassador	17
Citizen	16
Arts Correspondent	9
Academic	8
Local Councillor Labour	7
Christie's Auction House	6
Local Councillor Lib Dem	6
Spokesperson for other museum	6
Heritage Lottery Fund	4
Other	29

However vociferous, Morrison and Jones were not representative of the voices and perspectives given most prominence in the debate about Sekhemka. The anger that characterises their commentary, and their clear position on the ethics of the sale were, in the news reporting at least, drowned out by a broader range of voices and perspectives. The full breakdown of the 375 sources used throughout the sample can be seen in Table 1¹²:

As might be expected, Tory councillors and spokespeople were the most frequently cited sources in the sample. Given that they were the architects of the sale this is perhaps unsurprising. Other prominent sources included the MA and the Save Sekhemka Action Group (SSAG), both key voices in opposition to the sale. Arts Council England was the next most cited source, again mostly coming out in opposition to the sale.

What also emerges in this high level analysis is how *infrequently* certain sources were utilised. Spokespeople for other museums, academics and oppositional voices within the council were all near complete absences in the debate. The SSAG was clearly vexed by the invisibility of other museums and heritage institutions. Their spokesperson's frustration is palpable when they ask in their own coverage 'What about the rest of our UK museums?' ... 'do you not care about this issue?' (8 March 2013¹³). There were only six instances of representatives of other museums intervening. These included the Director of the German Westphalian State Museum for Art and Cultural History and the Director of the New Orleans Museum of Art who both spoke out against the sale (both quoted in *New York Times*, 5 April 2016). On the whole, representatives of other cultural institutions were not – or would not be – drawn into the debate.

To aid in the analysis the standpoint of each individual source on the ethics of the sale was coded as outlined previously. The results of this analysis are detailed in Table 2.

It is notable how infrequently NBC spokespeople asserted that the sale would be ethical. Conservative council sources were far less likely than others to offer a perspective on the ethics of the sale. In fact, no group or individual repeatedly came out in direct support of the sale as ethical and a much more complex picture emerged. The MA, SSAG and ACE were all likely to assert that the sale was unethical, although in a minority of cases an MA or ACE spokesperson's perspective was indiscernible. The view of local council opposition sources was mostly ambiguous. The Egyptian Ministry and the Ambassador in the UK were unequivocal in denouncing the sale on ethical terms and citizen and academic perspectives were likely to be in agreement that it was unethical where they appeared. These latter sources in particular were likely to question the museum's possession of the Sekhemka statue as itself ethically (and perhaps legally) problematic. There was some merit in this position as the legality of the sale was called into question by a number of different sources. Richard Morrison in *The Times*

Table 2. Sources in the coverage broken down by perspective on the ethics of Sekhemka sale (alphabetised).

Source	Ethical	Unethical	It's complicated	Not discernible
Academic	0	6	1	1
Arts Correspondent	0	5	4	0
Arts Council England	0	22	0	11
Christie's Auction House	0	0	0	6
Citizen	1	11	1	0
Current Lord Northampton estate	0	2	0	1
Department of Culture Media and Sport spokesperson	0	0	0	19
Egyptian Ambassador	0	17	0	0
Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities	0	18	0	0
Heritage Lottery Fund	0	0	1	3
Local Councillor Conservative Party	11	0	2	66
Local Councillor Labour	0	2	0	5
Local Councillor Liberal Democrat	0	3	0	3
Museums Association	0	37	3	9
Save Sekhemka Action Group spokesperson	0	43	0	2
Spokesperson for other museum	0	4	0	2
Other	0	12	4	13

provocatively asserted that the statue was acquired when the Marquess went to Egypt and 'raid[ed] the place' (*The Times*, 14 September 2012). 'What moral right' he asked 'does Northampton Council have to sell Sekhemka anyway? It never brought him in the first place.'

The language from oppositional voices strengthened over the course of the sampling period to the point where in March 2016 Gunilla Loe of the SSAG summed up the situation as follows

In July 2014 a unique part of the World's shared cultural heritage, the beautiful, four thousand year old statue of the Egyptian Scribe Sekhemka, was privatised and locked away from view thanks to the unethical actions of David Mackintosh MP, Northampton Borough Council and the, apparently, morality free auction industry who, ignoring ethical objections, put the importance of obtaining a world record price for an internationally important museum piece over the retention of it in a museum for everyone to enjoy. (17 March 2016)

Their assessment of the 'relevant bodies' was that they 'stood by wringing their hands, crying crocodile tears but doing nothing to prevent that exploitation', and on DCMS, ACE and the MA in particular, Loe asserted that they 'ha[d] demonstrated no practical initiative or leadership' and were 'ultimately toothless in the absence of either legal tools or the corporate will to protect the nation's heritage'. The group called the sale a 'humanitarian disaster' and a 'cultural crime' (1 September 2015), 'immoral, unethical and unprofessional' (21 April 2015). SSAG even tried to make their case by connecting with highly charged discourses about national security in their call to (then Prime Minister) David Cameron to step into the debate (24 July 2015). Such 'crimes' they said only aid so-called Islamic State and others who benefit from the trafficking of antiquities. Sekhemka, they claimed, had been turned into a commodity 'to be sold on the rich persons equivalent of E-bay' (11 July 2014). The excess that characterised SSAG's own statements about the sale was however mitigated where they were used as sources in the press coverage as will be seen.

Discussion

There are a number of findings that emerge from the above overview. Firstly, the data shows that representatives from other museum and heritage institutions remained virtually silent on the issue of the sale. It is beyond the scope of this article to speculate as to why that might have been. Suffice to say that a separate investigation into how museum Directors, Trustees, Curators and others understand their complex obligations within such contexts would be enlightening. Secondly, the Sekhemka coverage in the news media seemed a missed opportunity for a broader and bolder discussion about cultural funding and where it could or should be coming from. The local and national policy context for culture and the arts was almost entirely missing from the debate. Thirdly, it is clear that no-one wanted to make the case that the sale was ethical, not even NBC sources who remained equivocal on

that issue in their public statements about the case throughout. Ambiguity was thus a key defining characteristic of this debate about museum ethics. Lastly, the data shows that those who argued the sale was unethical were heard, but that their reasoning was not. This last assertion will be unpacked in the remainder of this section.

The data shows that only 20% of sources speaking out against the sale articulated – or were given space in the report to articulate – reasons *why* they felt the sale was unethical. Nearly 80% of the time such justification was not forthcoming. Even SSAG – whose perspective on the sale did not falter – failed to communicate their appraisal of just why the sale was unethical in their frequent appearances as sources in the mainstream news coverage. This of course may have had ramifications for members of ‘the public’ trying to make up their own minds about the ethics of the sale. Without knowing what was at stake readers might have found the debate difficult to access and exclusionary. This particular problematic was captured perfectly by MA President David Fleming in one of the BBC news articles that *did* provide a more nuanced perspective on the sale when he said

My sense is the public has no understanding of why museums might not want to dispose of things for financial reasons. / On the contrary, the public that I met during the Sekhemka argument were saying, ‘What’s wrong with selling something if that means the museum has a future? Why wouldn’t you do it?’ (BBC 2015c)

The analysis of the reporting presented here shows that in most cases those questions simply weren’t being addressed. The MA reporting is clearer on why the sale might have been deemed unethical, but such reporting cannot be deemed mainstream public discourse. Fleming touches here on a key recurring problem with communications about museum ethics: that they are complex and open to interpretation. This issue is amplified however given the fact that newspapers famously and historically do context badly (Kunkel et al. 2002). Kunkel et al. have found that news coverage often suffers from a paucity of relevant background or contextual information which makes thorough public examination of the significance of events and developments described nigh on impossible. When newspapers focus on what they call ‘episodic’ coverage of discrete events located in specific places and times, ‘thematic’ coverage reflecting wider historical, societal or policy issues tends to be squeezed out (Kunkel et al. 2002, 8). In the case of Sekhemka, that meant a broader discussion about cultural funding, public trust and stewardship was mostly overlooked in favour of reporting a series of discrete events that culminated in Sekhemka leaving the country. This is not incidental, but neither is it surprising. These are complex debates and it is unclear how the discourses they activate translate for members of the public as will be seen.

However, these perspectives were not entirely absent from the reporting. Within the 20% of instances where a stance of ‘unethical’ was detailed, two themes that emerged were the sale as a betrayal of public trust (41%), and as a betrayal of the stewardship role of museums to look after objects in perpetuity (45%). It is worth remembering here that these were very much minority perspectives from sources, and more likely to be visible within international reporting. Where these themes did appear key terms in the discussion included ‘public trust’, ‘public interest’ and ‘safeguarding’

At a time when public finances are pressured it is all the more important that museum authorities behave in an ethical fashion in order to safeguard the long-term public interest. (David Fleming, President of the MA in *Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 1 August 2014)

Its actions are a clear violation of public trust at a local, national and international level. (Sharon Heal, Director of the MA in *Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 1 August 2014)

The term ‘public’ allied to ‘interest’ and ‘trust’ requires further examination here as it is ambiguous at best (McQuail 1999). The word ‘trust’, as above, is used a total of 41 times in the press sample. When sources talk about a ‘violation’ or betrayal of trust along these lines, it is often unclear who it is that is being let down and how. According to Meredith Cook (2003) ‘public interest’ is an intentionally amorphous concept not least because it must adapt and change over time. Public interest arguments relate to a broad range of values and principles that are seen to speak to the ‘public good’. In the case of Sekhemka we might say that the public interest arguments referred to the decisions that were being made by those in public office: their transparency, integrity, and fairness. The arguments might also

have related to the use of public resources in supporting the activities of museums in the first instance, not least in collecting and archiving. But these are not straightforward debates, and their boundaries are porous. Scott Furlong of ACE offers a full and articulate appraisal of why the sale might be considered unethical in a BBC interview but the fullness of this perspective is rare in the sample and again raises questions about how citizens might interpret such a position, and in so-doing, decide upon their own

It is of great importance that the public retain their trust in museums to look after the collections held in their name. There is a very real risk that this trust, and particularly that of potential donors and funders, will be seriously undermined if disposals from public collections are seen to be driven by financial considerations and in breach of our professional standards and ethical code. (BBC 2014c)

It might also be questioned to what extent the public can interpret the subtleties of arguments about stewardship and in particular, the rights of ‘donors’ to museums. In a local news report Sharon Heal says ‘Any family that has donated items to the museum in the past will be wondering what the future of that item is’ (*Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 19 June 2014), but this presumably is not a real world experience for most members of the public. The discourse surrounding public interest debates can be alienating and exclusionary. It begs the question, are there as yet unexplored ways of translating debates about museum ethics for the public domain?

An overview of keywords used in the reporting shows that the word ‘ethical’ was used 77 times and became a pivotal discursive construct in the reporting. The sale was called a ‘tragedy’, ‘catastrophic’, ‘scandalous’, ‘inexcusable’, ‘controversial’, ‘wrong’ and (25 times) ‘a moral crime’. The word ‘flog’, with all of its negative connotations of dodgy goods and quick sales, was used a total of 13 times in the press sample. That Sekhemka might be cursed was also a recurring and tantalising refrain

A curse should be put on Northampton Borough Council for agreeing to sell a 4,000-year-old Egyptian statue, an opposition politician has claimed. (*Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 18 July 2013)¹⁴

Yet as has been argued here the grounds upon which such profuse and unbridled language was deemed justifiable oftentimes was not clearly articulated. As such, ‘ethics’, as a discursive construct, was in danger of collapsing under its own weight in the debate.

Conclusion: the curse of Sekhemka?

Today, there is an unprecedented interest by public media worldwide in ethical issues and museums. Ethical issues are no longer subjects for confined discussion in professional gatherings, academic teaching of museum studies, or seminars for those who work in museums. The professional conduct of museums has become mainstream news. (Murphy 2016)

As Murphy notes above, and as the analysis has demonstrated, the professional conduct of museums has indeed become mainstream news. With that and the above findings in mind – not least the fact that ‘thematic’ coverage of complex issues and their context is likely to be lacking in reporting – it would seem pertinent that a lexicon is found for translating debates about museum ethics in public discourse. If such a vocabulary can be found citizens may become emboldened in their own participation in such debates, and those representing other cultural institutions may be more visibly and usefully drawn into those debates as well. As it stands, given the available language to reason this case of museum ethics, explanations as to why the sale of Sekhemka was an ethical issue at all were nigh-on invisible in the reporting. We might conclude then that the existent lexicon is too limited, or too inaccessible, another reminder that ‘ethics is never easy’ (Marstine 2011, 20).

Although outside the scope of this study, it would be informative to carry out attitudinal analyses of members of the public to explore how they interpret key terms like ‘public interest’ and ‘in public trust’, and to understand better how nuanced debates about ethics are refracted in their own discourse, if at all. Such an analysis might reveal whether those speaking out in the press on issues of museum ethics are representative of citizen perspectives, or whether, as David Fleming proposed in the case of Sekhemka, public opinion might diverge quite spectacularly.

A report for the MA in March 2016 showed that there were a number of other UK institutions considering similar sales indicating that the tussles about what constitutes ethical museums' practice may become bloodier and more consequential still. As Gunilla Loe of the SSAG has said 'Sekhemka was a battle, not the entire war, which is far from over' (17 March 2016). As further cases unfold it would be prudent to keep media reporting under close scrutiny. The coverage of the Sekhemka sale demonstrates there is significant work to be done to translate debates about museum ethics into a palatable – and fruitful – mainstream discourse.

Notes

1. The buyer remained anonymous at 30 August 2016.
2. The ICOM definition of a museum is broadly applicable within the UK context (ICOM 2007). Northampton Museums is an example of a Local Authority funded service and not a nationally or privately financed one. This is useful contextual information for what follows.
3. The Brooklyn Museum record can be accessed at https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3939/Seated_Statuette_of_Sekhemka (Accessed 8 January 2017).
4. The Collections Trust has also issued extensive guidelines (Collections Trust 2011).
5. Indeed, since that time there have been other controversial sales to overseas buyers as reported in BBC 2016.
6. In particular the President, David Fleming; Director, Sharon Heal; the Convenor of the Ethics Committee, Nick Merriman and Policy Officer, Allistair Brown.
7. In the UK the difference between broadsheets and tabloids is still understood as significant and indicative of the kind of market position and coverage that can be expected. Tabloid journalism is typically sensationalist and gossipy, and more often than not, politically right of centre.
8. Sources were coded as Arts Correspondent; spokesperson for Department for Culture Media and Sport in the UK; spokesperson for the Museums Association; Local Councillor Conservative Party; Local Councillor Labour Party; Local Councillor Liberal Democrat Party; Save Sekhemka Action Group spokesperson; Christie's Auction House spokesperson; Heritage Lottery Fund spokesperson; Citizen, Arts Council England spokesperson; Lord Northampton Estate spokesperson; Other Museum/Heritage Institution spokesperson; Egyptian Government Minister; Egyptian Ambassador in the UK; Academic; Other.
9. The data was then analysed using the software package SPSS.
10. <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/stop-the-sale-of-sekhemka-by-northampton-council> (Accessed 14 November 2015).
11. Over the course of the sampling period the narrative ebbs and flows around key dates such as the sale itself in July 2014, the dates of the export ban being put in place, being renewed and being lifted, and the launch of the MA's new code of ethics in January 2015.
12. All sources in articles were coded. The most used in a single report was 6. For this reason the total number of sources is far higher than the number of reports analysed.
13. Dated references to SSAG sources all come from posts at <http://sekhemka.blogspot.co.uk> (Accessed 6 August 2016).
14. So says Liberal Democrat leader, Councillor Brendan Glynnane.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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