

Northampton sale of Egyptian statue: Major assault on art and cultural provision in the UK

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Northampton Borough Council's sale of a 4,000-year-old Egyptian statue from its museum collection marks a further assault on public cultural provision.

The statue is one of two known statues of Sekhemka, inspector of scribes c.2400-2300 BC. It was presented around 1870 by the Marquess of Northampton. An 1880 Deed of Gift stated it must be "accessible to the public at all proper times."

The council removed it from public display in 2010, citing insurance costs, among other reasons. This was simply a prelude to sale. A subsequent Freedom of Information request revealed that insurance cover that year was lower than before, and the insurers were imposing no additional security arrangements.

In 2012 the council launched a supposed public consultation exercise on the sale.

The Museums Association (MA) had given the council written advice to "consult explicitly about the proposal to sell". The council's questionnaire, however, did not ask "whether the sale should go ahead". Instead, in the words of MA ethics committee chairman Nick Merriman, it simply asked respondents "to tick which area of investment the sale proceeds should go to."

At the time the statue was valued at £2 million. The council asked respondents only whether this should be spent on the restoration of Delapre Abbey, the expansion of Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, the establishment of a National Shoe Museum or the development of Abington Park Museum.

Nor did the questionnaire "acknowledge the historical importance of the object to the museum."

The MA's Code of Ethics allows for financially motivated disposal in exceptional circumstances. David Fleming, chair of the ethics committee, explained that it provides for such sales "only as a last resort after other

sources of funding have been thoroughly explored". The MA says it had asked Northampton "to seek alternative sources of capital funding before undertaking the sale of such an important item", but "[t]he council did not provide evidence that it had done this."

Residents set up a Save Sekhemka Action Group (SSAG). They opposed the sale of the statue, but if it had to be disposed of for curatorial reasons said they would prefer it was loaned to another museum. Before the sale protesters said that if the council no longer wanted to display the statue they should return it to the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities, which had itself challenged the sale.

SSAG opposed suggestions that the proceeds be used for Delapre Abbey as the proposals were "too vague" and had "not been planned out."

In 2013 SSAG called on the council to redisplay the statue. SSAG's Ruth Thomas, chair of the Northamptonshire Ancient Egyptian Society, pointed to the issue of insurance, noting that the Friends of the Museum had already offered £8,000 for a more secure display case. She also drew attention to legal questions over the 1880 Deed of Gift's provisions for display and preventing disposal. The inaccessibility of the statue for the previous three years was in clear breach of the Deed, SSAG argued.

The motion was defeated by the Conservative majority on the council. Council leader David Mackintosh declared that they were determined to sell the statue as soon as possible, with the proceeds going towards a £14 million extension to Northampton Museum and Art Gallery.

Questions arose over ownership of the statue, now valued at £4-6 million. It was revealed that 45 percent of the sale proceeds would go to the Marquess of Northampton, whose family had "gifted" the statue to the

museum. SSAG remain unconvinced that legal title has been definitively established.

Last week the statue sold for £15.76 million. Northampton Council will take around £8 million for the museum development. The multimillionaire Marquess will pocket another £6 million.

Funding and museum accreditation bodies warned that the sale could have serious consequences for the council and museum.

Ruth Thomas explained that income from the sale would be “completely offset by the much greater amount lost from grants and subsidies no longer available if the museum loses its accreditation.”

Arts Council England (ACE) warned that the sale of collections “will only further alienate both key funders and the public”. ACE said it would now be assessing Northampton’s accreditation status. Northampton Museum has received over £200,000 in ACE grants over the last two years.

An example of the alienation came even before the auction. Alan Moore, the comic book writer, described the planned sale as “undercutting one of the fundamental principles by which museums acquire artefacts”. Moore said he had donated items to the museum, but “would not be able to do that again in the knowledge that at some point in the future that gift, made in good faith, could be sold off by a council.”

The Heritage Lottery Fund warned that the sale “would be taken into account” when assessing future funding applications.

Mackintosh and the council have been bullish about the risks, offering token acknowledgement of the criticisms. Mackintosh claimed that having kept ACE “informed of our actions and plans ... we see no reason why we should not retain our accredited status.”

The museum extension, used to justify the sale, might itself be threatened. Loss of accreditation will jeopardise the matched grant funding required for the project. SSAG claim there “still are no such detailed, costed, plans” for the extension.

Mackintosh also tried to sidestep the MA’s concerns. The MA will consider financially motivated disposal if it can be demonstrated that “[t]he item under consideration lies outside the museum’s core collection as defined in the collections policy.”

With breathtaking hypocrisy Mackintosh claimed the statue had “never really been the centrepiece of our collection”, as it had not been on display for four years (since it was withdrawn from exhibition) and no one had

asked to see it during that time.

David Verey, chairman of the national fundraising charity Art Fund, described these arguments as “very, very thin ... The cash will disappear within a year, so it’s gone.” He warned that the statue will probably go into a private collection and not be seen again.

Alan Moore said it would be a “resounding shame upon this town” if it looked like “the kind of place that’s prepared to sell off all of its culture, all of its heritage, at the drop of a hat.”

That is exactly what is happening. The Northampton sale must be placed in the context of the recent statement by Bruce Katz, former adviser to US President Barack Obama, to the *Independent* that British cities should look to Detroit as their model for “regeneration.”

His remarks make clear that the looting of art works, public pensions and even water resources underway in Detroit in the interests of the corporate elite is now the model for cities everywhere.

As in the United States, there is no opposition within the establishment parties for such wholesale plunder. Northampton, like other Conservative councils, is enthusiastic about selling off the contents of its public museums and art galleries. The Labour Party accepts the argument that artefacts can and should be sold to make up funding shortfalls.

Last month Plaid Cymru MP Jonathan Edwards called on a local council to re-examine its stored artworks. “We have seen parks, toilets and sports fields given away, and public services cut or out-sourced to save money. I want the council to at least explore the value of this collection”.

The ruling elite are pauperising the working class to maintain their own privilege and wealth. Their plunder extends to cultural impoverishment.

Working people must reject the claim that art works have to be sold off to fund other public services. The defence of culture is a basic component of a healthy society and is inseparable from the struggle to defend the living standards of the working class.



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