

The Wight Stuff

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CMoG's Karol Wight Protects 3,500 Years of Glass in Corning, and Antiquities Worldwide

by Alison Fromme

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Under the low lights of the gallery, Dr. Karol Wight stands with her arm outstretched, pointing toward a display case. Spotlights focus attention on an exceedingly rare piece of ancient glass protected inside. It is a small blue and white cup, just the right size to fit in your hand.

This is cameo glass, she explains, and a personal favorite. About two thousand years ago, a Roman glassblower layered hot white glass on top of blue and formed the cup shape. Once the piece cooled, a skilled artisan carved away some of the white, leaving a detailed religious scene on a rich blue background. A priestess stands in front of an altar with her right arm raised, and a woman approaches with offerings.

This quiet pause in the hushed gallery contrasts starkly with the rest of Karol's day, scheduled to the minute with meetings, phone calls, and research, in between travel to conferences and other engagements. Her bright, light-filled corner office bustles with energetic evidence of work: papers, books, and notes organized on the desk, table, and shelves.

As president and executive director of the Corning Museum of Glass (CMoG), Karol is charged with leading an organization with \$45 million in assets and a priceless glass collection spanning 3,500 years. CMoG's ultimate goal is to "tell the story of a single material: glass" and Karol and her team do that with hands-on technology exhibits, glassmaking shows, make-your-own glass activities, an extensive research library, and nearly 50,000 objects in the historic and contemporary galleries.

Now, Karol has a role beyond the museum as a member of the U.S. State Department's Cultural Property Advisory Committee. Not only is she an executive caretaker of CMoG's antiquities, but also those threatened worldwide.

"I am deeply honored to have been appointed by [former] President Obama to the Cultural Property Advisory Committee and look forward to representing the American museum community in future discussions concerning the protection of cultural patrimony of other nations," said Wight. "I feel very privileged to serve my country in this way."

Threats and Protections

Consider a family heirloom stolen and sold at a pawnshop. The story that gave the item meaning and value is lost forever. And a piece of family history vanishes.

Antiquities are like the world's heirlooms: a physical record of our shared human history. An Egyptian sarcophagus, a Roman cup, an Islamic jug, a Buddha statue. Illegal looting and pillaging, careless removal from archaeological sites, and stealing from museums and collections all threaten cultural artifacts.

But for centuries marked by exploration, colonization, and war, returning with stolen loot was standard practice. And the cultural implications of thefts weren't recognized.

People—from archaeologists to dealers to museum professionals to citizens—have since recognized that the looting of antiquities is a problem. In 1970, the countries of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) met to address the problem and figure out how to stop the illicit import, export, and transfer of culturally important objects. They agreed that ending pillaging meant reducing the market for stolen goods, helping countries protect their own archaeological sites and museums, and encouraging the legal exchange of materials for education and research. The U.S. later enacted its own law, signed by Ronald Regan, to implement the UNESCO agreement by the establishing the Committee and other measures.

In the Bill, the State Department commented that the expanding antiquities trade has led to “the mutilation of ceremonial centers and archaeological complexes of ancient civilizations” and to the stealing of objects from museums, churches, and collections. The victimized governments “have been disturbed at the out flow of these objects to foreign lands,” and when those objects turn up in the U.S., there are “outcries and urgent requests for return by other countries. The United States considers that on grounds of principle, good foreign relations, and concern for the preservation of the cultural heritage of mankind, it should render assistance in these situations.”

The assistance is ongoing and urgent. All nations are at risk, according to the Cultural Heritage Center. Culturally-rich countries lacking the funds to protect their cultural material are particularly in danger. And conflict zones are even more vulnerable. In Syria, for example, recent satellite imagery illustrated the rampant increase in “looting pits” dug at ancient archeological sites. According to experts, sales of items stolen across the Middle East have been used to fund the Islamic State (ISIS).

Although the eleven-member Cultural Property Advisory Committee doesn’t work directly on the current Middle East crisis (other legislation addresses that issue), it offers a layer of protection against trade in stolen antiquities from other countries. Peruvian figurines. Ancient Guatemalan stone masks. Bulgarian glass goblets. Egyptian Islamic glass lamps. Glass beads from funerary caves in Mali.

“The purpose of the Committee is global,” Karol says.

Here’s how it works. Countries around the world can submit requests to establish or renew agreements to protect their cultural heritage, and the Committee reviews the requests and advises the president on the matter. If the U.S. enters into an agreement, the U.S. will restrict the import of specific objects from that country, and the Department of Homeland Security will enforce the restriction, stopping items at the border. Before her appointment, Karol had already assisted the Committee by testifying for an agreement with Italy and by communicating with Homeland Security over a suspicious shipment.

Now, before purchasing items, many dealers and museums require specific documentation about objects’ “provenance”—a kind of pedigree of ownership to prove that the object wasn’t stolen, at least not recently.

“The issue of looted antiquities today is an even greater problem than it has been for the past ten or fifteen years because of the current situation in the Middle East,” Karol said at a forum of the Antiquities Coalition in 2015. “I really believe that anyone that’s engaged with the market, whether it’s a museum, a private collector, a vendor, whether an auction house or a dealer, is responsible for checking the provenance of these works that are being offered in the market, to the best of their ability. Having said that, it’s increasingly difficult to try and track provenances like this. But it’s only through controlling the market that we’re going to get a handle on stemming the flow of antiquities out of the Middle East and into Europe and American marketplaces.”

The blue and white cameo glass cup, says Karol, is one example of a CMoG object that has excellent provenance, tracing ownership back more than 100 years.

Known as the Morgan Cup, it was owned by J.P. Morgan, the nineteenth-century financier and collector of art and antiquities. He acquired it from a dealer known as Joseph-Ange Durighello, the son of a French diplomat stationed in what is now Lebanon. In 1951, long after the death of J.P. Morgan, Arthur Houghton, vice chairman of the Pierpont Morgan Library and cofounder of the Corning Museum of Glass, acquired the cup and then donated it to the museum the following year.

Uniquely Skilled

Before coming to the Corning Museum of Glass in 2011, Karol spent twenty-six years at the world-renowned Getty Museum in Los Angeles. As a UCLA art history graduate student in the 1980s, she interned with Arthur Houghton, who had become a curator there, and met David Whitehouse, then president of CMOG, when he visited.

The two men asked Karol to prepare documents required to make ancient glass purchases at an upcoming auction in London. “I was suddenly working with a material that I had never studied before,” Karol later said. “The more I started doing the research for the acquisition proposals, the more I realized that this was really interesting material.”

One of the purchases—a mold-blown glass beaker—became the subject of her Ph.D. work, and after she graduated she stayed at the Getty as a curatorial assistant and resident ancient glass expert, seeing the museum through a \$275 million renovation.

Then, before the museum reopened, Karol’s boss, Marion True, was accused by the Italian government of knowingly buying stolen ancient artifacts, along with a Paris-based dealer. Marion had already returned several Italian items when informed of their illicit origins and she had persuaded the Getty to establish strict standards for acquiring objects. She denied the new allegations and left her position before the trial began. Karol was appointed Curator of Antiquities.

“It was awful,” Karol says. “It could have been any number of curators.”

As the trial proceeded over five years, some objects from the Getty were returned. The *L.A. Times* reported that one piece, an ancient urn dating to about 340 BC, was purportedly “unearthed in Italy by an excavator in 1974, sold to a smuggler for a pig, and purchased by the Getty from a Swiss art dealer in 1981 for \$275,000.”

Despite the turmoil, the Getty Museum acquired in 2008 a third-century Roman marble sarcophagus, demonstrating its strict policy: proof that an artifact was removed from its country of origin before 1970 or that it was legally exported and then imported to the United States. An 1881 scholarly work traces the sarcophagus to a former French ambassador to Rome, who acquired it there in 1852, Karol explained at the time.

To move forward, Karol helped the Getty leadership shape a collaborative agreement with both the Ministry of Culture in Rome and Sicilian officials. They returned more items and kept some on loan while the Getty Museum staff completed conservation work on them.

“So much was learned about the objects,” Karol says of the conservation work. “It was richly rewarding.” And in 2010, the Italians dropped the charges against Marion True.

In 2011, Karol was appointed Executive Director and Curator of Ancient and Islamic Glass at the Corning Museum of Glass, following the footsteps of her mentor, David Whitehouse. “I’m thrilled that I’m at an institution where I can indulge in my passion, 24/7,” Karol said at the time. “As much as I love the rest of ancient art, glass has always been my passion, so to be here is really a wonderful fit for me. I’m excited to be working with such a great team of people here at the Museum, people that I’ve known and worked with for many years.”

One of the first things Karol did on her arrival was review, strengthen, and formalize the acquisitions policy, with the advice and consent of the board of trustees.

“At the Corning Museum of Glass, we have a very restrictive acquisitions policy when it comes to archaeological material. We require some documentation of a work prior to 1970 and we try and go beyond that to establish the history of a piece once it’s left its country of origin,” Karol explained at a forum of the Antiquities Coalition in 2015. “And I have to say provenance really enhances the value of a work of art that’s on the market because museums and collectors feel secure in what they’re acquiring for their collections.”



Later, CMOG added two ancient items to its collection. One, a portrait inlay of the pharaoh Akhenaten from the 1330s BC, was acquired at an auction with a documented chain of ownership dating back to 1949. The second, a dark purple glass bowl from the fourth or fifth century AD with an intricate Nile River scene of birds, a dragon fly, and lotus flower—and among the most complete examples known of this type—was acquired from a private collector, who had thought it was a replica. The ownership documentation was scant, and CMOG required a certificate from the Israeli government stating that it had no claim to the object.

In 2015, Karol was promoted to president of CMOG. Throughout her time at the organization, she oversaw the \$64 million Contemporary Art + Design Wing expansion, added new leadership positions, and assembled a new team of curators.

Karol has also asked, “What can we contribute?” Recently, she sent Assistant Curator Katherine Larson to a workshop at the University of Pennsylvania to learn about how others in the field document provenance and to share information about CMOG’s resources online and at the Rakow Research Library, which is a digitized collections catalogue, academic research, historic photos, and auction catalogues, all of which can help others document provenance of ancient objects.

“I think it is fair to say that we are an ambitious institution that has always wanted to grow and exceed our expectations,” Karol says. “We have successfully built our visitation over the course of our existence to reach our current total of 460,000 visitors a year from all over the world. You wouldn’t necessarily think that we are an international destination, but we are, and we are delighted that the guests who arrive from Europe or Asia carry back the news of their visit and inspire others to come.” In a town of just over 11,000 people, that is a lot of visitors.

Glass continues to fascinate Karol. “When I started studying the glass pieces, I realized that these craftspeople working two and three thousand years ago were being extremely experimental in what they were doing and, either through accident or intent, they had found ways to manipulate this incredible material,” she said. “Plus, everything they did in antiquity is still done today, utilizing the same techniques that were developed two thousand years ago. I think that’s incredible.”

As for the Morgan Cup, Karol says it’s lovely to have the collection history, but there’s also so much to be learned from the cup’s imagery itself. She still wonders: Did cameo glasses serve a purpose in rituals about the god of wine? Were they just drinking cups with nice decorations? Who used them? How were they marketed? Were they diplomatic gifts? Looking at glass this way helps us relate to it more, she says, and these types of questions might guide a future reinvention of CMOG’s permanent collections exhibits.

Without knowing where these antiquities—rare and ancient heirlooms—originated, how they were made and used, and the path they took to get to Corning, they might just be pretty ornaments, lacking a meaningful story. But antiquities like the Morgan Cup, with one layer carved to reveal another, offer glimpses into our shared human history, for anyone to see, protected and illuminated in the hushed Corning Museum of Glass gallery.

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