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Finders Not Keepers: Yale Returns Artifacts To Peru

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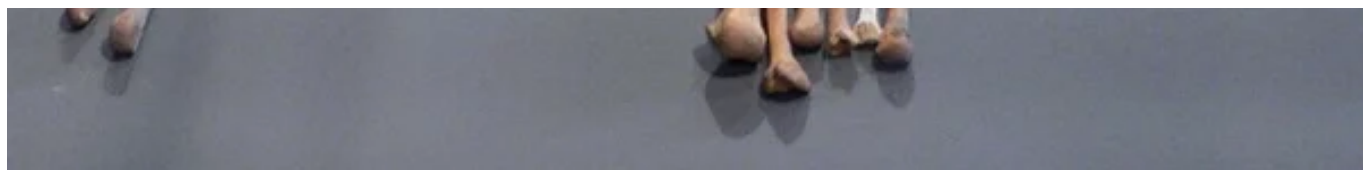


Between 1912 and 1915, Yale explorer Hiram Bingham III excavated thousands of artifacts from Machu Picchu — an Inca site perched high in the Andes Mountains. Many of those objects have now been returned to Peru, after spending 100 years at Yale University.

Cris Bourmoncle/AFP/Getty Images

High in the Andes Mountains, Peruvians have been lining up to see a collection of antiquities that have finally returned home. The objects from the Inca site of Machu Picchu spent the past 100 years at Yale University in Connecticut, where they were at the center of a long-running international custody battle.





This human skeleton is among the objects that Yale has returned to Peru.

Tim Moran

Now, the university is giving back thousands of ceramics, jewelry and human bones from the Peabody Museum in New Haven to the International Center for the Study of Machu Picchu and Inca Culture.

Yale anthropology professor Richard Burger has been in charge of the ancient artifacts for nearly 30 years. Standing in the courtyard of a museum in Cuzco, Peru, he says the historic building was placed above an Inca palace — set atop a foundation of ancient Inca stone walls.

"The Inca who built this palace was the son of Pachacutec or Pachacuti, as he's sometimes called," Burger says. "Pachacuti was responsible for building Machu Picchu, so in some way, the materials are returning to the son of the builder of Machu Picchu. It's like bringing back the family goods."

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The objects in question were excavated between 1912 and 1915 by Yale explorer Hiram Bingham III. They left Peru under a special governmental decree.

"The Machu Picchu situation and dispute was really fundamentally different from other repatriation issues," Burger says.

Unlike many art and artifact disputes, this one was not about *stolen* goods, explains Sharon Flescher, executive director of the International Foundation for Art Research, which helps track looted antiquities.



Explorer Hiram Bingham III, shown above in 1917, embarked on multiple expeditions to Machu Picchu in the 1910s. The Inca site was known to locals but largely forgotten internationally. In 1911, Bingham wrote about Machu Picchu in *National Geographic* magazine and refocused international attention on the ruins.

Harris & Ewing Collection, Library of Congress

"They were never allegedly taken in violation of patrimony laws, or clandestinely dug up," Flescher says. "This was really much more of a contractual dispute."

Peruvian officials contended that the materials were *loaned* to Yale for research. After World War I, the university returned some of the artifacts, but argued that the school could keep the rest under the laws of the day.

Over time, Peru's demands grew louder. Machu Picchu is an iconic place for the Peruvian people, and the idea of bones and artifacts from Peru being held in the U.S. took on a powerful symbolism.

In 2008, Peru's government filed a lawsuit against Yale. Negotiations intensified, and a letter from Yale alumni urging their alma mater to return the artifacts helped move the process out of the courts. Peruvian historian Mariana Mould de Pease was happy to avoid the expensive legal route. She says Yale alumni played a key role in "getting this matter where it has to be — in the academic world."

In November 2010, Peruvians held a demonstration in Lima demanding that Yale return the artifacts taken by Bingham.
Cris Bouroncle/AFP/Getty Images

The dispute was resolved through two separate agreements. The first, between Yale and the Peruvian government, established that the university would return all of the objects by the end of 2012.

The second established a partnership between Yale and the San Antonio Abad University in Cuzco to share stewardship of the collection. The schools will also collaborate on academic research. Keeping the antiquities in a scholarly setting was key, says David Bingham, grandson of the explorer who found them.

"To leave it just to the political system in Peru — that would be worrisome," Bingham says. "It is so uncertain, whereas the universities in Peru are as old as the universities in the United States."

Flescher, of the International Foundation for Art Research, says the focus is back where it should be — on the collection.

Musicians perform at the inaugural ceremony of the International Center for the Study of Machu Picchu and Inca Culture — a partnership between Yale University and The National University of San Antonio Abad in Cuzco.

Tim Moran

"The settlement itself shifts the emphasis from the ownership of the objects — whether it's Peru or Yale — to stewardship and preservation and research and exhibition," she

says.

This story has unfolded over 100 years, during a time of tremendous shifts in attitudes toward cultural patrimony, Flescher says. "Whether they're the Mediterranean countries with Greek and Roman classical objects, whether they're the Latin countries with Aztec, Mayan and Inca ruins, the current trend seems to be leaning towards the source countries and helping them reclaim objects that were taken when they had less power," she says.

Back in Cuzco, professors from both schools met to inaugurate the new museum. Among them was Oscar Paredes, who teaches social sciences at the university in Cuzco.

He says Peruvian professors are finally on equal footing with their Yale counterparts. And now, alongside the hundreds of thousands of tourists who pass through Cuzco each year to visit the terraced stone ruins of Machu Picchu, the citizens of Peru will be able to see the historic relics many have never seen before.

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