

2/13/1979

# for release:

THE DENVER ART MUSEUM • 100 West 14th Avenue Parkway • Denver, Colorado 80204  
Contact: Susan Landess 303/575-2794

## BACKGROUND MEMORANDUM:

### DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN ZUNIS AND THE DENVER ART MUSEUM

The Denver Art Museum is well known for its outstanding Native American art collection. Approximately one year ago, Zuni tribal officials became aware of the War God sculpture in the museum's collection which was donated to the museum in 1953 by Clarke Field, an art collector in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He had purchased the work earlier from Arthur G. Clark, a United States Government surveyor, who is believed to have collected the sculpture during the period of his survey work at Zuni sometime between 1899 and 1901. Since its acquisition by the museum 25 years ago, the sculpture has regularly been on public display and its picture and description have been widely published in books and articles on Native American art.

A little over a year ago, a Zuni representative contacted the museum and requested return of the War God, stating that War Gods were, in their view, communal property so that they could not be acquired legally. Since that time, the museum and the Zunis have held a number of meetings in an effort to resolve their respective concerns, and the Zunis have also requested the museum's assistance in deterring traffic in stolen Zuni objects. These discussions are continuing and there is no timetable for completing them.

It has been the museum's policy not to acquire stolen art objects, and it subscribes to the UNESCO museum policy against such actions. However, no one knows how Mr. Clark originally acquired the sculpture, or from whom, and there is no way to determine those facts at this time.

While the Zuni presently feel that, as communal property, no one could ever have had a legal right to sell the object, the museum understands that they may have been sold by the religious officials of the tribe, as recently as the early 1960's. No records or inventories have been

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kept of these War Gods, a number of which are carved each year, to be placed in remote, open shrines by Zuni Bow Priests. The museum believes that the head Bow Priest at approximately the time the museum's piece was collected was Dr. Frank Cushing, a New England anthropologist, who had been adopted by the Zunis.

The museum respects the sincerity of the Zunis and recognizes the importance of their religion to their people and the significance of War God sculptures to that religion, but is greatly concerned by the complexity of the issues involved. The museum is a public trust on behalf of the people of Denver and the nation, and as such, has fundamental responsibilities to collect important objects of esthetic and cultural significance and to assure their safekeeping for the growth of knowledge, cultural understanding and artistic enjoyment of the public.

The museum is concerned by the fact and the principle of the proposal to give away an object from its collection, especially one which is believed to be the finest example of its type. As part of the museum's collection, the object is also communally owned by all the people of Denver.

The museum has held the object in good faith for over 25 years, exhibiting, publishing and protecting it for the benefit of the public throughout the world. Should the museum donate the object to the Zunis, it will be placed in an outdoor setting subject to the hazards of the natural elements of windblown sand, intense heat, cold and certain, and in fact intentional, deterioration and destruction. New War Gods are produced annually to succeed and supplement their predecessors; they are intended to "eat themselves up." The possibility of theft also exists. The Zunis have outlined plans to increase

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security measures at the several shrines which are near public roads, but acknowledge that a large number of more remote shrines also exist and are largely unprotected. The return of the object will assure its ultimate destruction.

One of the museum's greatest concerns is for the precedent that would be set by donation of the sculpture to the Zunis. The implications of that precedent can well lead to numerous claims by other Native American tribes and many other countries, cultures and religions, for objects in this museum's and other museums' collections. To our knowledge no legal precedent exists of a museum donating an object to any religious group on the basis that the object is of religious significance and should be presumed to have been stolen by virtue of having been communal religious property. There is concern that to set such a precedent can cause immensely complex problems for museums of many kinds throughout the nation.

The museum recognizes that cultural and religious attitudes of nations, religions, tribes and groups change from time to time, and that related objects are viewed differently by those entities as different times. The museum, like most museums, contains a multitude of objects from virtually every major culture which have at one time or another been considered of great religious or cultural importance. Those include Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Pre-Columbian, as well as Native American, religious objects. The museum is concerned about the consequences that could ensue should other groups assert that certain museum objects are of great significance to them, since the circumstances of the original acquisition of many ancient objects in many museums are undocumented.

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Zuni representatives, including leaders of the Deer and Bear Clans and the senior Bow Priest, who are responsible for War God sculptures for the tribe, recently made a presentation to a joint meeting of the Collections Committee (which includes non-Trustee members) and the Board of Trustees in January. The purpose of the meeting was to provide the museum with complete information on the Zunis' position and proposal, so that the museum would then be in a position to assess all of the background, circumstances and mutual responsibilities and related considerations in making a decision. The museum and the Zunis are both interested in conducting the on-going discussions in an objective and cooperative way in order to reach, if possible, mutually acceptable solutions.

The Zuni representatives have stated that their religion is essential to the well-being of the tribe and that the War God is the most important and sacred religious object. They believe that the War God sculpture embodies an eternal spirit which protects the tribe and all the peoples of the world when attended to by the appropriate rituals of their religious leaders. They hold that if a War God is not in its shrine, its mischievous and potentially malevolent powers create misfortune and disasters such as floods, wars and bad crops all over the world. They propose that the War God be given to the Zunis by the museum, so that proper religious ceremonies may be performed and the sculpture then placed in its appropriate setting at an outdoor shrine on the reservation, where it may be attended according to ritual requirements.

The Zunis have also assured the museum that if the sculpture is donated to the Zunis by the museum, they will make no further claims on the museum. The museum plans to continue its discussions with the

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Zunis and within the museum in order to find, if possible, a mutually acceptable resolution of the problems. The museum also wishes to assist the Zunis in deterring the traffic in stolen important religious objects, and hopes that all of these matters can be resolved in a timely fashion.

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## NEWS RELEASE

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### RESOLUTION OF DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN THE DENVER ART MUSEUM AND THE ZUNIS

The Board of Trustees of the Denver Art Museum adopted the following resolution at its meeting on March 21, 1979:

1. Zuni religious leaders have informed the Board of Trustees of the Denver Art Museum that the Zuni War God, Ahayu:da, which has been in the Museum's collection for more than 25 years, is a religious deity which represents an object of continuing worship whose presence in the Museum, rather than its original shrine, is offensive to the religious principles of the Zuni people, and makes impossible the conduct of a part of their religion.
2. Zuni leaders have advised the Trustees that under Zuni law the War God constitutes communal property of a kind which cannot legally be sold or given away.
3. The Board of Trustees has been advised by qualified anthropologists and its own staff that in the Zuni religion it is true, as stated by the Zuni leaders, that the War God is a deity and a present, animate, object of worship, rather than a symbol or art object.
4. The Trustees have considered these facts in the light of all of the related interests and responsibilities of the Museum, as the art agency of the City and County of Denver. These include not only the Museum's responsibility for the preservation of its collection but also its interest in strengthening its relations with the Zuni people and other creative cultures as an institution which displays and preserves art objects from all cultures with sensitivity and appreciation.
5. In view of these and other considerations, it is the belief of the Trustees of the Denver Art Museum that it would be in the best interests of the Museum and the people of Denver to authorize the presentation of the Zuni War God, Ahayu:da, to the Zuni people. The Trustees therefore direct the proper officers of the Museum to meet with duly constituted representatives of the Zunis to arrange for its placement in a suitable shrine under appropriate security conditions, and further to discuss with such representatives other possibilities for enhancing the understanding between the Zuni people and the Museum with respect to matters of mutual concern.

The contents of this resolution were communicated to the Zunis at that time. On March 29, 1979, a representative of the Zunis contacted the Museum with their statement in response to the Museum's resolution and requested that this statement be released concurrently with the Museum's release of its statement of resolution. The Zuni statement is as follows:

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The Zuni religious leaders and representatives of the Zuni tribe are very pleased with the decision of the Denver Art Museum to return the sacred War God, Ahayu:da, to the Zunis. The Zuni leaders wish to commend the Board of Trustees of the Denver Art Museum for their taking an enlightened step in recognizing the importance of Native American religious practices. The Zuni people extend their thanks to all those individuals and organizations which have supported the Zunis in this successful effort to have the Ahayu:da returned.

The Museum has agreed to the Zuni request that we make no further public statement on this matter.

3/30/79