Terevaka Archaeological Outreach (TAO) 2020 Project Report: Digital Repatriation

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The Ngaro Project presents the products of research and educational outreach conducted by Terevaka Archaeological Outreach (TAO) between 2009 and 2020. The focus of the project is to organize information originally collected by Easter Island resident and activist, Ida Luz "Piru" Hucke Atan, regarding cultural resources from the island that now reside in collections across the world. Visits to twelve museums across the U.S. helped to amass an interactive database of high-resolution images of 447 objects (www.terevaka.net/ngaro). The project not only provides an example of digital repatriation, but also provides a structure for a multimedia, online platform that could lead to additional crowd-sourcing of information to develop a more inclusive approach for museums and Indigenous communities to collaborate in the future.

Keywords: Digital repatriation, museums, TAO

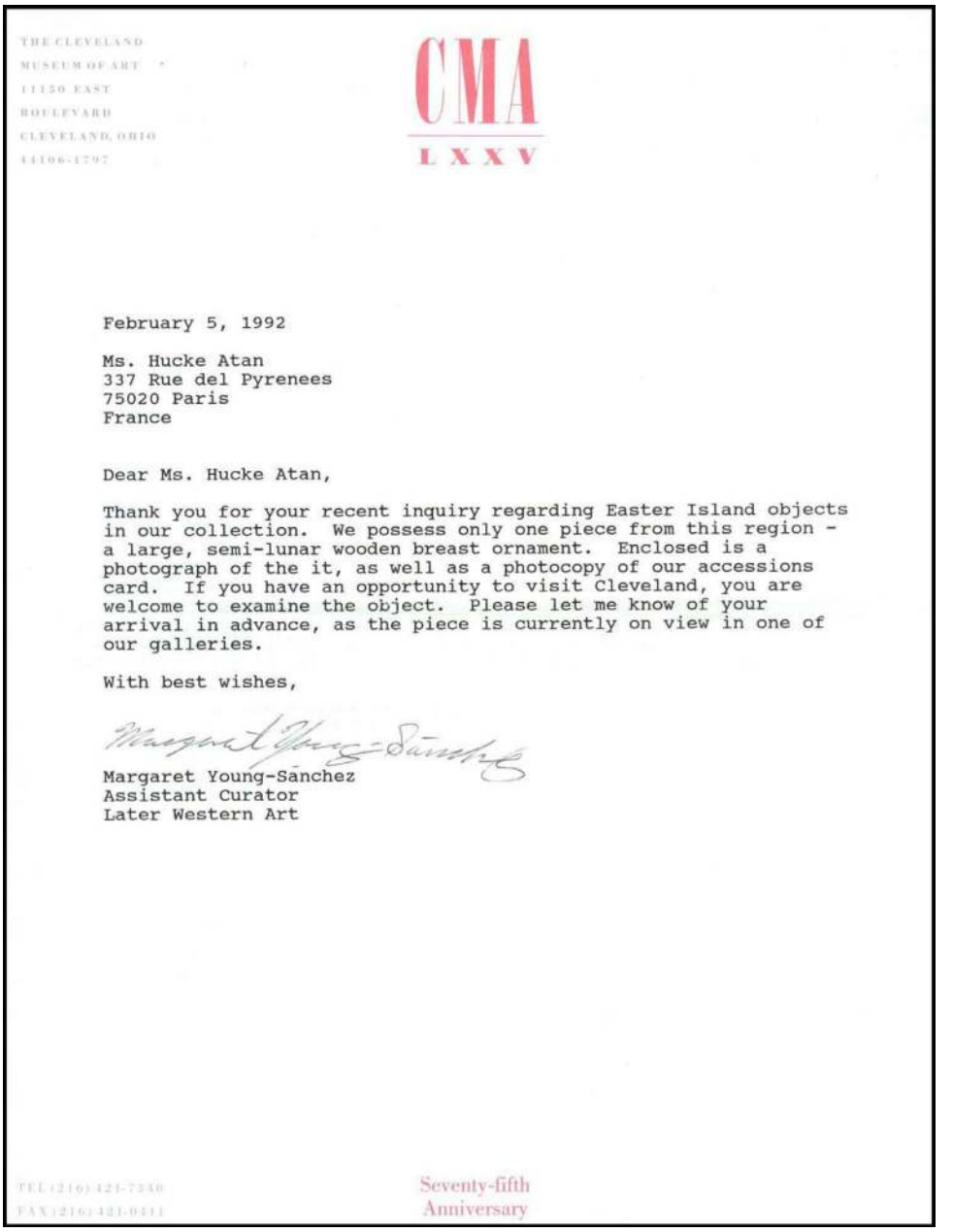
Introduction

Since 2003, Terevaka Archaeological Outreach (TAO) has offered unforgettable experiential education opportunities for Rapa Nui youth regarding archaeology, traditional lifeways, technology, and sustainable development. Like many industries, education has taken a hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, and international fieldwork on Rapa Nui has become nearly impossible for the time being, with the closure of the island's airport to visitors.

However, TAO managed to continue with its mission in 2020, with a project that culminated in the launch of an unprecedented digital repatriation campaign through the internet and social media. The Ngaro Project (*ngaro* meaning "lost") provides exploration of 447 cultural resources from Rapa Nui—that now reside in museum collections across the United States—through an interactive map and more than 1000 high-resolution photographs.

The Ngaro Project webpage (www.terevaka.net/ngaro) offers a simple tool for members of the island (and global) community to appreciate the material culture of Rapa Nui. However, the Ngaro Project was far from simple, requiring more than a decade to develop. In the early 1990s, Ida Luz "Piru" Hucke Atan began a monumental letter-writing campaign to more than 50 museum, university, and private collections in at least 13 different countries across the planet (Fig. 1). Hucke's original correspondence made it clear that the initial goal was fact-finding: learning which collections had objects that hailed from Rapa Nui and what those objects were.

Department of Anthropology, Northern Arizona University, PO Box: 15200, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5200.



THE CLEVELAND
MUSEUM OF ART
11150 EAST
BOULEVARD
CLEVELAND, OHIO
44106-1797

CMA
LXXV

February 5, 1992

Ms. Hucke Atan
337 Rue del Pyrenees
75020 Paris
France

Dear Ms. Hucke Atan,

Thank you for your recent inquiry regarding Easter Island objects in our collection. We possess only one piece from this region - a large, semi-lunar wooden breast ornament. Enclosed is a photograph of the it, as well as a photocopy of our accessions card. If you have an opportunity to visit Cleveland, you are welcome to examine the object. Please let me know of your arrival in advance, as the piece is currently on view in one of our galleries.

With best wishes,

Margaret Young-Sánchez
Assistant Curator
Later Western Art

TEL (216) 421-7340
FAX (216) 421-0411

Seventy-fifth
Anniversary

Fig. 1. Example of correspondence (1992) from the Cleveland Museum of Art in reply to Hucke's original inquiry.

Going Digital

In 2009, Hucke brought her work (at least 500 loose-leaf pages divided in two large binders) to the Museo Antropológico Padre Sebastián Englert (MAPSE), the island's public

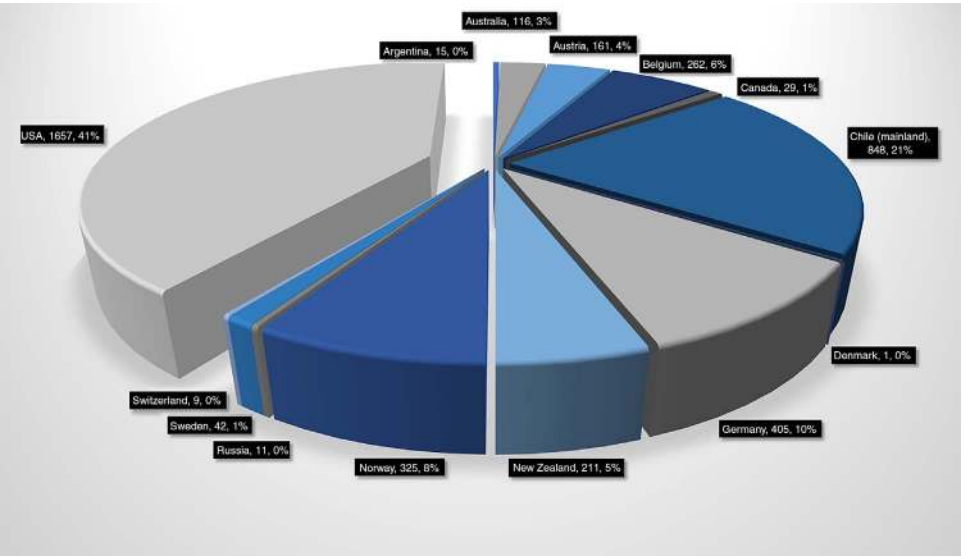


Fig. 2. Quantities and locations of more than 4000 objects identified by Hucke residing in collections outside of Rapa Nui.

museum, for safe keeping. Hucke proposed that both the museum and TAO could help in digitizing her records and continuing to organize the information in a useful manner. Between 2009 and 2013, MAPSE and the students/staff of TAO undertook the painstaking process of carefully organizing and scanning the paper records. Hucke's work included original typewritten correspondence with museums and individuals around the globe, photocopies of museum collection inventory cards and summaries, photocopies of photographs, and Hucke's own handwritten notes.

In 2014, Hucke presented a motivational guest lecture for TAO students, encouraging them to pick up where she had left the project (Shepardson et al. 2014). Between 2014 and 2019, TAO staff and students created a structured digital archive and transcribed the scanned documents into Microsoft Excel databases. Ultimately, the databases included records of more than 4000 objects that reside in collections outside the island (Fig. 2). While curators and institutions were not consistently able to provide information for all fields, the data included: (1) object name/type; (2) primary materials included; (3) catalog numbers; (4) measurements for three basic maximal dimensions for each object; (5) names of the individuals who collected the objects; (6) years in which the objects were collected; (7) names of the individuals who donated the objects to institutional collections; and (8) years in which the objects were donated to institutional collections.

Fieldwork in US Museums

In 2019, TAO students and staff began to add new information to the database, focusing on museums within the United States. Precise locations, contact information, and museum curator names were all incorporated into the database to facilitate a new effort to contact institutions, and to plan in-person visits to collections for research and digital photography purposes in the fall of 2019. Renewed correspondence with museums ultimately led to the

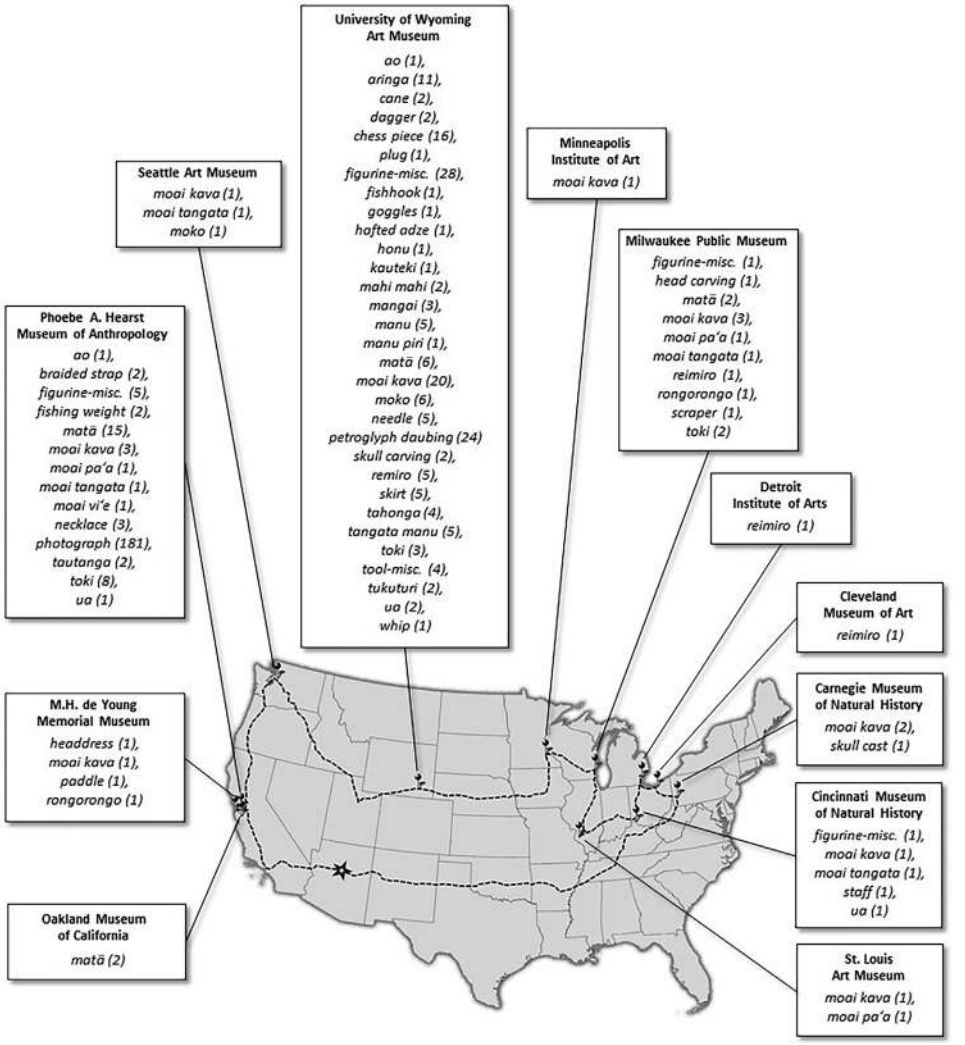


Fig. 3. Travel route, museum locations, and object types/quantities included in the Ngaro Project. The largest collection, at the University of Wyoming Art Museum, can be traced to archaeologist William Mulloy and generous donations made by the Mulloy family.

planning of a detailed itinerary for a thirty-day driving tour of the United States to visit 12 museums across the country:

- M.H. de Young Memorial Museum (San Francisco, CA)
- Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology (Berkeley, CA)
- Oakland Museum of California (Oakland, CA)
- Seattle Art Museum (Seattle, WA)
- University of Wyoming Art Museum (Laramie, WY)
- Minneapolis Institute of Art (Minneapolis, MN)
- Milwaukee Public Museum (Milwaukee, WI)

- St. Louis Art Museum (St. Louis, MO)
- Cincinnati Museum of Natural History (Cincinnati, OH)
- Detroit Institute of Arts (Detroit, MI)
- Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH)
- Carnegie Museum of Natural History (Pittsburgh, PA)

Other museums in the United States, known to have objects from Rapa Nui in their collections, were omitted from the itinerary either because they were too difficult to incorporate logistically, they failed to reply to emails, their exhibits were temporarily closed, or they were simply unwilling to contribute to the project's goals. Eleven of the 12 participating museums graciously offered access to their collections and a working space for photography at no cost. The Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, as a notable exception, charged a substantial daily fee to work with the collections, even for educational/non-profit purposes.

TAO Director Britton Shepardson traveled more than 10,000 miles by car in November of 2019 to work with the collections of the 12 participating museums. The journey—from city-to-city, motel-to-motel, campground-to-campground—began and ended in Flagstaff, AZ. In sum, 447 objects from Rapa Nui were documented, measured, weighed, and photographed (Fig. 3).

For each object, three maximal dimension measurements were recorded using a tape measure and digital calipers. Weights were recorded using a 0.1-gram precision digital scale. High-resolution photographs were taken with a Canon EOS-6D DSLR body and

Fig. 4. Home-built lightbox/stage lighting kit with synchronized strobes and mounted camera.

Fig. 5. Shepardson (right) discussing Rapa Nui material culture with employees and university interns of the Milwaukee Public Museum.

Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM lens. Augmented lighting, to account for variable work environments from one museum to the next, was provided by two synchronized Neewer-S400N flash strobe monolights. Objects were staged on a homemade, collapsible wood/plexiglass lightbox to reduce shadows (Fig. 4). Primary materials, provenience, and chain-of-custody information were also verified for each object, when museum records were available. In many cases, museum personnel were delighted to be included in the project and were eager to learn more about Rapa Nui culture, the significance of each object, and the grassroots approach of TAO education (Fig. 5).

Repatriation Prospects and Preliminary Observations

The Ngaro Project is neither an endorsement for physical repatriation of all objects nor justification for the objects to remain in US museum collections. The information stemming from the project is meant to be purely educational. Just as each individual object holds unique value, each individual object has its own unique story that includes the sequence of events and/or relationships that led to that object being removed from the island and placed into museum curation. Without understanding the detailed background for each individual object, cogent arguments for *or* against repatriation are nearly impossible.

Collectively, the 12 museum collections that were visited included more than forty types of objects (Fig. 6). Two of the included object types (petroglyph daubings at the University of Wyoming Art Museum and photographs at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology) are known to have been made by researchers from outside of the island. Thus, excluding photographs and daubings, the three most common objects curated in these

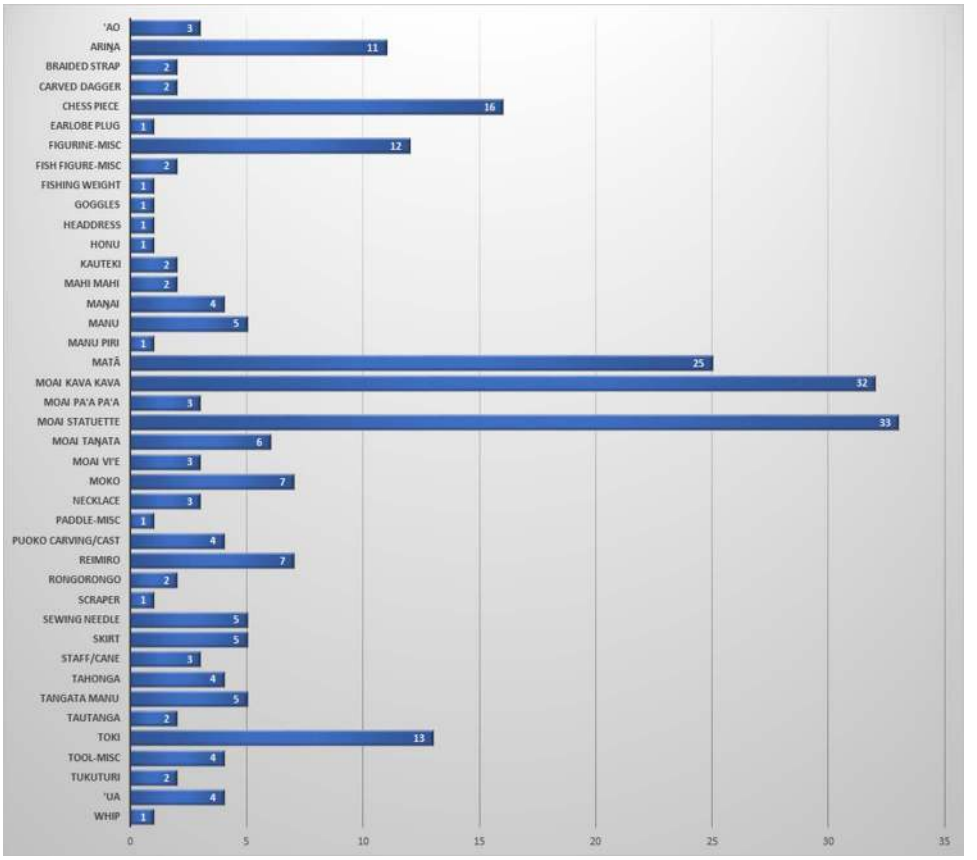


Fig. 6. Typology/quantity of objects documented and photographed among 12 US museums during the Ngaro Project. The figure does not include 180+ historic photographs from the 1934–35 Métraux expedition to Rapa Nui that reside in the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology nor the 24 petroglyph daubings from the University of Wyoming Art Museum.

museums (*matā* or obsidian blades, *moai kava kava* or emaciated male figurines, and *moai* statuettes) account for nearly 40% of all collections. Given the acquisition dates of these objects (none older than 1900), and the prevalence of such objects in handicraft markets on Rapa Nui today, the *moai kava kava* and the *moai* statuettes were in all likelihood purchased at market value, exchanged in a bartering process with island visitors, or gifted to visitors by local community members on Rapa Nui. If this were the case, there might be little or no justification for physical repatriation of such objects, especially considering the dearth of chain-of-custody information that accompanies these objects in most museum collections.

The prevalence of *matā* in US collections, however, could provide a significantly different situation. For decades, *matā* could be purchased at artisan markets on the island, but they could also be collected relatively easily across the surface of the island at thousands of archaeological sites. The sale of *matā* and/or the removal of obsidian from the island has now been banned by law. And unfortunately, the casual encounter with *matā in situ* across the island's countryside has become much rarer over the last twenty years because of their extraction from archaeological sites by both visitors and island residents.

Fig. 7. Screen capture of the Ngaro Project webpage including map, tabbed pop-up window, and interactive collections/query lists.

The fact that so many of these *matā* were created by unknown islanders at undetermined times, and that collectively, they form an integral component to Rapa Nui's material and cultural heritage presents a more persuasive foundation for a case meriting future exploration of physical repatriation.

Concern or desire for physical repatriation of objects might also be fostered by the reality that less than 5% of all objects documented in these 12 museums regularly go on public display. The vast majority, in fact, have *never* been part of a public exhibition in any of these museums—they are stored permanently in archival spaces or separate warehouses. This complicates any museum's mission to share examples of cultural heritage from around the world—although, some museums go to great lengths to share information regarding archived objects, even if the object itself is not on display. At the same time, if any/all objects were to be returned to Rapa Nui, the single museum on the island is already

Fig. 8. High-resolution photographs of the Milwaukee Public Museum's stone *moai* statuette from four different angles (photos: Shepardson 2019).

experiencing a shortage of space and lacks climate control technology that is vital to the long-term preservation of some objects.

Digital repatriation, however, through photographs/models presents a rapid (albeit temporary) solution to the complex political, family, conservation, emotional, and scientific issues that surround cultural heritage. For the time being, the island community as well as the global community have equal access to the digital images and data that were produced during the Ngaro Project through the TAO website (www.terevaka.net/ngaro). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, a copy of the digital database and all high-resolution photos will also be donated to MAPSE, so that members of the island community would not necessarily depend on high-speed internet access to peruse the records.

Fig. 9. High-resolution photograph of the University of Wyoming Art Museum's *kauteki* or hafted adze (photo: Shepardson 2019).

Interactive Digital Repatriation

The Ngaro Project webpage offers an interactive approach to exploring the history, imagery, and physical details of more than 400 objects in 12 museums across the United States (Figs. 7–13). The webpage uses a combination of HTML, CSS, JavaScript, Google Maps API, and XML coding languages to produce a Google Map with interactive markers that launch tabbed pop-up windows for each one of the 12 museums.

The first tab offers: (1) the name of the museum; (2) a direct link to the museum's website; (3) the location of the museum; and (4) the quantity of Rapa Nui objects in the museum's collection. The second tab offers: (1) a link to a complete PDF document listing all museum catalog entries for objects traceable to Rapa Nui; (2) a list of all primary materials identified in these objects (in case future scholars choose to conduct research on particular materials, rather than object types); (3) the range of collection and accession dates, when available, in museum provenience documentation; (4) scanned documents regarding Hucke's original correspondence with museums; and (5) a comprehensive list of object types and quantities within the museum's collection. The third tab offers thumbnail images and links to high-resolution photographs of all objects, sorted by object type. A fourth tab (currently not visible) has been prepared for the interactive website to include an embedded 3D visualization tool, as many museums are beginning what will certainly be a long-term effort to create three-dimensional scans of each and every object within the museum.

The interactive map is accompanied by a list of direct links to all museums included in the project on the right-hand side and a query tool to identify museums that curate particular types of objects on the left.

Fig. 10. High-resolution photograph of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum's artisanal *rongorongo* tablet (photo: Shepardson 2019).

Fig. 11. High-resolution photographs of the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum's *moai kava kava*, or emaciated figurine, from four different angles (photos: Shepardson 2019).

Future Directions

The Ngaro Project would not have been possible without the collaboration and support of Piru Hucke, MAPSE, the 12 participating museums in the United States, and the students and staff of TAO. Digital repatriation might not be a permanent solution or alternative when it comes to physical repatriation efforts. However, it is a relatively rapid, low-cost, and accessible first step to help inform indigenous and local communities, as well as the general public, about important material cultural heritage that has been removed from its homeland. The willingness of large and prestigious institutions across the United States to collaborate

Fig. 12. High-resolution photograph of the St. Louis Art Museum's *moai pa'a pa'a* (photo: Shepardson 2019).

with a grassroots organization like TAO provides proof-of-concept that collaboration can increase our awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation for matters related to cultural heritage.

The scalable structure and multimedia capabilities of the Ngaro Project webpage allow for the immediate and long-term contributions by additional museums, universities, or individuals with collections of objects from Rapa Nui as well. And ultimately, the model might provide precedent for crowd-sourcing such information for public education purposes.

Fig. 13. High-resolution photograph of the *reimiro* or *gorget* from the Detroit Institute of Arts (photo: Shepardson 2019).

TAO is supported entirely by donations from concerned individuals and institutions around the world. Please help us continue to strive for cultural awareness and sustainable heritage management by making a donation (www.terevaka.net/donate.html).

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