

# Stealing History

**A**lthough the morality of the black market in cultural material has been questioned by most and condemned by some, the black market continues to thrive. Museum customers may be fewer in number but they persist, and they have been joined by a new breed of private collector — the speculator — interested in monetary rather than historical value. Increasing numbers of “culture consumers” and reduced barriers to communication and transport have combined to open up new markets and cause more destruction. In recent years the illicit trade has been marked by —

- Increasing trade with Asia and Africa, and the appearance on the market of cultural items from both continents.
- A greater interest in ethnographic material.
- The targeting of previously immune religious monuments. Buddhist and Hindu temples in Asia are vandalised and Christian churches in Europe and institutions are stripped of their icons and frescoes.
- The reappearance of trade in paleontological material.
- Improved means of detection and destruction. The metal detector has found its place alongside the long probing rod of the Italian tombarolo and the car aerial of the American pot-hunter. Bulldozers, dynamite, and power tools out-perform picks and shovels.
- The appearance of new ways of marketing and selling cultural material, such as mail-order catalogues and Internet auctions. Internet sales have opened the market to millions of potential new customers and are virtually impossible to police.

### ***Context Means Information***

An object and its context together, when properly recorded and interpreted, can reveal much more than either in isolation. An apparently unimportant antiquity, for instance, might acquire great significance if it can date associated material or features, or is found far removed from its usual area of distribution. Thus sherds of mass-produced Roman pottery are, by them-

selves, of little interest, but when found in situ during an archeological dig in India they cause a great deal of excitement. They help to date the site and at the same time cast light on trade relationships. Even documentation of the original findspot of a piece, its provenance, can be important as minimal context, provided that the documentation is reliable.

Improvements in scientific techniques continue to increase the importance of context. For centuries pots have been rigorously cleaned to reveal their shape or decoration — their aesthetic qualities — which determine their price on the market. Now chemical and microscopic analyses of their residual contents can reveal much about their past contents. A recent cover of the scientific journal *Nature* carried the headline “Feasting on Midas’ Riches” and reported chemical analyses of residues preserved in bronze bowls from an eighth-century B.C. tomb in Gordion, central Turkey — the time of the legendary King Midas.<sup>1</sup> Analyses revealed the remains of a great funerary feast — a spicy meal of sheep or goat washed down with a potent brew of barley beer, wine and mead. How many illicitly traded pots or metal vessels are examined so thoroughly? When the adhering soil is washed from a looted pot to reveal its financially valuable surface, how much information about ancient society is lost?

It is also possible to extract information about past climates and environments from properly contextualised paleontological specimens, which have become a valuable resource as concerns grow over global warming and increasing levels of pollution. For example, chemical studies of the strata occupied by microfossils reflect ocean salinity and the degree of glaciation millions of years ago.

Ethnographic material too has a context: the function and meaning that an object has in the society from which it is acquired. During colonial times, when many ethnographic collections were assembled, such details were rarely recorded; objects were collected for the quality of their craftsmanship or for their beauty. In consequence, these collections often reveal more about the tastes and prejudices of the collectors than

the people and societies from which the collections were acquired. The significance of an ethnographic item is enhanced greatly when the item is accompanied by oral or written testimony concerning its use or meaning. Indeed, today, sound and video recording are often an essential part of an object's documentation.

### ***The Human Right to Heritage***

An ethnographic object without contextual information is an object stripped of meaning — it reflects our own conceptions of beauty but tells us little of other people and places. It leaves us ignorant of its original social value and purpose or, worse, puts us at risk of misunderstanding them. For the society that produced such an object, removal from its traditional setting of worship and care might be an act of desecration. The right of a people to their cultural heritage will have been denied.

Archeological remains often are vital for the rediscovery of a people's history while ethnographic material provides a visible and easily accessible reminder of a people's traditions and accomplishments. The removal of archeological remains steals from a people part of their identity, part of their collective psyche. In view of this, some argue persuasively that the right to a cultural heritage is a fundamental human right, and that the destruction of cultural heritage should be treated as a violation of human rights.

### ***A Justifiable Trade?***

Illegal removal of objects from their country of origin, and the damage to objects caused by removal from their original contexts cannot be defended. Cultural objects are illicitly moved from south to north, from east to west, from the third and fourth worlds to the first, and from poor to rich. There is no countervailing flow. As the collections and museums of Europe and North America begin to accumulate Djenné terracottas from Mali or Khmer sculpture stripped from the temples of Cambodia, their counterparts in those countries do not benefit from acquisitions of "treasures," say, from ancient Greece or Rome. Illicit trade in cultural material is not a force for international

harmony and understanding; illicit trade promotes division and resentment.

Most, if not all, collectors (some academics and curators too) regard antiquities as works of art. They argue that, regardless of their origin, antiquities should be displayed for all to see and appreciate — a celebration of human artistic genius that transcends time and space. "Art," however, cannot be used to justify destruction and illegal looting. Many objects marketed as works of art have been ripped from historic buildings or monuments. Methods of acquiring art have often entailed the destruction of artistic or architectural masterpieces.

### ***Profit Margins***

A number of illicit trading cases have been investigated over the years, usually when a valuable "treasure" has been reclaimed or its status questioned. Exchange chains revealed through investigation provide some information about the sums of money that change hands and the profit margins involved. In all cases over 98 percent of the final price was destined to end up in the pockets of the middlemen; the original finder received very little and the final buyer can hardly claim to have obtained a bargain. Such high percentages are not unusual. It has been estimated, for instance, that in the Petén region of Central America looters receive about \$200-\$500 each for vessels that might ultimately sell for \$100,000. The situation with paleontological specimens is no better. A fossil turtle bought from its finder in Brazil for \$10 fetched \$16,000 in Europe. A landowner in the United States accepted \$2,000 for a late Cretaceous Ankylosaur that was subsequently sold for \$440,000.

### ***Non-Renewable Resources***

These dollar amounts reveal the simple truth of the illicit trade — there are large sums of money to be made, very little of which ever reaches the original finders. But the story does not end there. Once commodified on the Western market, objects continue to circulate for years, perhaps centuries, generating money in transaction after transaction. None of this money goes to the original finders or owners or their descendants. And this point is critical. Some say, with some justification, that a small sum in the



West might be a substantial amount in a hard-pressed subsistence economy, and no one could complain of people's selling pots or fossils to help feed their families. But if culture is regarded as an economic resource then selling it abroad is a poor strategy of exploitation. Cultural heritage is, after all, a non-renewable resource.

The purchase of looted antiquities is not a humanitarian act. In the long-term, looting undermines a community's economic base just as surely as looting depletes its heritage.

### ***Drugs and Dirty Money***

Another aspect of the illicit trade in cultural material is its relationship with the illegal drug market. Beginning 2 or 3 years ago, reports began to appear that the gangs dealing in money laundering or drug smuggling were also dealing in antiquities. For example —

- In January 1999, Spanish police broke up a smuggling ring that had been planning to trade stolen art and antiquities for cocaine.
- In 1985, a smuggler's plane arrived in Colorado from Mexico carrying 350 pounds of marijuana from western Chiapas and many thousands of dollars worth of pre-Columbian antiquities.
- Heroin, arms, and antiquities are now regularly seized along a well-known route by which Gandharan sculptures leave Afghanistan for Russia and the West.
- In Guatemala and Belize, cocaine and Mayan stelae are flown to Miami and other United States cities from secret airstrips in the rain forest.
- Miami has become a crossroad for illicit antiquities — from Ireland, Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, and Greece — precisely because, according to the U.S. Customs Service, there is so much "dirty money" swirling around in the city.<sup>2</sup> Drug profits pay for the antiquities, which are sent for auction to obtain a better pedigree for the cash.

### ***Violence***

The emergence of drug gangs and the link between money laundering and antiquities is a sinister development and the situation is gradually deteriorating.

- Ian Graham, now of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, has been photographing Mayan sculptures in situ in Central America for the past 30 years, mindful of the fact that, at some stage, it might be necessary to prove where these objects — so easily stolen — had been removed. Beginning in 1998, Graham came

up against violent gangs who were so intent on taking Mayan objects that they posted lookouts in makeshift observation posts at the top of palm trees to scare away anyone who was too inquisitive.

- In 1998, two guards at Guatemalan sites were killed at their posts.
- In one attack on the Angkor storehouse in the early 1990s, a guard was shot dead by rocket-wielding bandits.

### ***Corruption***

The police of many countries are also concerned about illicit trade because the large but undeclared sums of money that change hands during transactions can foster corruption in what are often impoverished bureaucracies. Yet in the bizarre logic of illicit trade this corruption is often used to excuse further criminal behaviour. If government officials or employees can be bribed so that the law is disregarded by those responsible for its administration and enforcement, why should a foreigner be expected to behave any differently? But this argument confuses cause and effect. The source of corruption is the large sums of money introduced by illicit trade.

Poorly paid and often outgunned officials of the "source" countries are not the only ones turning a blind eye. On more than one occasion, reports show, antiquities have been moved out of Jordan, Peru, Iran, and Nigeria with the personnel of Western embassies, sometimes as souvenirs, sometimes in diplomatic bags. And diplomatic bags can be large. A dealer in India using such a method shipped a container of antiquities when a diplomat was moving house.

### ***Fakes and Replicas***

Fakes are a hazard of the illicit trade. With no recorded findspot, it is left to the eye of the buyer (or the hired help) to decide what is fake and what is not. Fakes are designed to fool the expert and clever forgers have many techniques at their disposal — from simulating the accretions of grime and soot that may build up on an object stored for decades in the rafters of a smoky village hut, to smearing pots with mud from genuine archeological sites. One Mexican forger was so successful that he was arrested and accused of looting pre-Columbian sites. He was released only after demonstrating his craft.

In many parts of the world accurate replicas are produced for legitimate export, complete with carefully applied signs of age, but they then enter circulation as genuine artefacts. When

Chinese archeologists visited the United Kingdom in 1998 to reclaim stolen archeological material that had been seized by British customs agents 5 years earlier, they rejected about 20 percent as fakes or modern replicas. This suggests that perhaps a similar proportion of unprovenanced Chinese material currently entering the market is also fake.

#### ***The Scale of the Destruction***

The illicit trade in cultural material is hidden from view. In consequence, it is difficult to quantify the damage caused worldwide by theft, despoliation, and illegal excavation, or to assign value or structure to the market. There are very few facts and figures. Discussions often rely on anecdote and assertion and, as a result, collectors and dealers may dismiss concerns about commercial looting as scaremongering. But the opacity of the trade is not predetermined or natural. The opacity is maintained artificially by dealers and traders for what might be the usual commercial reasons: Their position in the market depends on maintaining a distance between buyers and sellers, or perhaps they wish to obscure the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate material.

#### ***Conclusion***

Historically, the antiquities trade has supplied a demand by the museums and private collectors of Europe and North America. Museums are often the final repositories of private collections, and it might be argued that, in the final analysis, museums underwrite the antiquities trade.

But the negative publicity generated by well-publicized cases has caused museums to take a more ethical stance, and many museums have now adopted policies that forbid acquisition or display of material of unknown origin, which cannot therefore be shown to be licit. In other words, if it cannot be demonstrated with any degree of certainty that cultural material is not looted, then a museum may not want to be associated with it. But some museums still continue to turn a blind eye.

Associated with the recent growth of the art and antiquities market has been a new breed of collectors, sometimes collecting purely for monetary profit. Furthermore several large, recently assembled collections of “ancient and tribal art” have been displayed and published, and their owners make no secret of the fact that the majority of the pieces have no verifiable

provenance, yet fervently deny that their pieces might be looted. Indeed some collectors adopt a selective and limited definition of the concept of theft tailored to exclude certain forms of excavation.

In his book, *The Plundered Past*, Karl Meyer characterised tomb robbing as the second-oldest profession. Today, moral censure is shifting away from the practitioners and on to the customers, from those with few real options on a livelihood to those who could choose otherwise. Nobody has to collect illicit material. Ultimately, the looting of cultural material will stop only when collectors, museums, and dealers refuse to buy unprovenanced objects. No matter what protective measures are put in place, whether Draconian or liberal, they will be circumvented if a demand is created by a purchaser with few scruples or principles. In years to come collecting illicit antiquities will be as socially unacceptable as collecting rare bird eggs. But by then it will be too late. The cultural heritage of some parts of the world is already at the point of extinction.

#### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> *Nature* 23/30 (December 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> Tasker F. Lowbrow. “Art Smugglers Target a ‘Hot’ South Florida Market.” *Miami Herald*, (September 19, 1999).

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Established in 1996, IARC monitors and reports on damage to cultural heritage by the international trade in illicit antiquities that have been stolen or clandestinely excavated and illegally exported.