

Comment on “Irreconcilable differences?”: Scholars for Sale.

Ricardo J. Elia

Associate Professor of Archaeology

Department of Archaeology, Boston University

The antiquities market is a fundamentally corrupt system that sponsors looting, theft, smuggling, and deception in order to create and sustain a market for ancient art. Because it is founded on plunder and criminality, the trade taints all who participate in it. Its principal agents are those who profit the most from this system – dealers, who finance the looting and smuggling; private collectors, whose most important traits are a passion for acquiring art and a fat bank account; and museum curators, who buy from the dealers and stroke the private collectors for donations. Important adjuncts to this market system are the various specialists – mostly art historians and conservators – who are paid to identify, appraise, clean, and restore archaeological objects that surface on the market. Collectively they are responsible for the ongoing destruction of archaeological sites throughout the world.

For decades the antiquities market has promoted a unitary vision of how objects come to the market. This vision acts as a mythology that sanctions the collection of antiquities, blames the victims, and denies the reality of archaeological site looting. It is a fantasy world where source countries are repressive villains and collectors are heroes, where the economic forces of supply and demand have no effect, and where every one of the thousands of museum-quality antiquities that appear on the market each year comes from old collections or chance finds made by poor peasants. In the fantasy world of the antiquities market, systematic looting by criminal gangs does not exist, archaeologists are dreary Philistines who don't appreciate beauty, and archaeological context does not matter.

Geraldine Norman's view of the antiquities market (“Bad laws are made to be broken”) fits squarely into the mythology of the market outlined above. For Ms. Norman (1995), dealers and museum curators are “upright” and “very civilized” people who admittedly condone art smuggling, but deserve no censure because the smuggling is caused by unfair export laws of the source countries. If only the source countries opened up a legal trade, dealers and curators would not have to consort with criminals. True to form, in Ms. Norman's account, archaeological site destruction does not exist and there are no looters, only poor peasants who stumble upon art treasures.

In this brief comment I lack the space to deconstruct the mythology of the market. Kathryn Tubb has effectively dealt with several aspects of this mythology in her fine essay. Here let me address the claim that antiquities smuggling is caused by the unfair

export-control laws of source countries. The statement seems plausible enough, but Ms. Norman offers not a shred of evidence to support it. Surely there are other possibilities that would account for the looting and smuggling, the most obvious one being market demand, as Kathryn Tubb points out. If the problem was simply one of overly restrictive legislation, then we should see little or no looting in countries that have a legal commerce in antiquities. Yet this is not the case. In Israel, for example, where there has long been a legal market, looting of archaeological sites is rampant (Blum 2002). To cite a historical example, Egypt in the days of Howard Carter, looting was a constant problem despite the presence of both a liberal, legal antiquities market and a robust system of partage or sharing of archaeological finds with foreign excavation projects (Hankey 2001: 45–46, 62–63, 75–79, 171–189; Khater 1960: 165–171, 242–247).

Over the past fifteen years abundant scholarly analysis (much of it quantified), evidence from legal cases, and extensive journalistic reportage have demonstrated the extent to which the antiquities market operates as an economic system in which the demand of collectors for ancient art stimulates widespread looting of archaeological sites, thefts, forgeries, and smuggling, all of it funded and mediated through the agency of the dealers. No informed and honest person can deny that collecting causes looting, that looting causes destruction of the archaeological record, and that the destruction of the archaeological record is a worldwide problem. Lacking an effective challenge to these facts, the response of market advocates has been to deny, obfuscate, and attack using specious arguments and preposterous pseudo-statistics, like those of Carlos Picón and Philippe de Montebello, quoted in Ms. Tubb's essay.

There is really no point in carrying on debates with the art crowd, the people who are fully and financially invested in the antiquities market; their heads are in some aesthetic cloud-cuckoo-land and seem impervious to reason or fact. I would like to address the young professionals who haven't yet stepped into the abyss and sold their souls. It seems to me that the title of Kathryn Tubb's essay ("Irreconcilable Differences?") suggests a question of fundamental importance. In her own work as a conservator she has engaged the field in an important discussion about the ethical responsibilities of those who study and work with the material remains of the past. She long ago realised that the cliché that "the conservator's primary obligation is to the object" is an incomplete formulation at best, for conservators are not fetishists and serving an inanimate object, even a beautiful one, would be a bit odd. It must mean devotion to the preservation of a cultural object because that object has value and meaning to contemporary and future people; in short, conservators are serving a public interest through their work. Conservators who view their work as a public trust must think twice before working on undocumented, unprovenanced archaeological objects in the art market. It may serve a narrow, private interest, such as helping a dealer to launder looted objects, but it is difficult to see how serving a corrupt market that strips objects from their contexts, associations, and histories can be considered as an altruistic enterprise. Sadly, this lesson has not yet been learned even at Kathryn Tubb's home institution, University College London, despite the ethical policy that Ms. Tubb helped put into place there.

Given what we now know about the causal connection between unprincipled collecting and looting, no self-respecting professional should have anything to do with the antiquities market. I include archaeologists, art historians, museum curators, conservators, and technicians who may have occasion to lend their expertise to some aspect of the market or provide some benefit to it. First are those who directly service the trade: art historians who identify objects and write catalogue descriptions; curators who fuel the market with their purchases; conservators who clean, conserve, and restore; technicians who test, date, and identify; and archaeologists (unworthy of the name) who have one foot in an excavation and the other in the market. I also include those who are paid not in cash but in prestige or access: those who sit on museum boards; write articles for popular magazines that promote the market by running antiquities ads; or serve on the editorial boards of such publications. Enough is enough – you are either with the looters or against them.

References

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