

# Museo Arqueológico Nacional de España Revisited

JOSEPHINE SHAYA

*Open Access on AJA Online*

The April 2017 issue of the *AJA* carried a review of the Museo Arqueológico Nacional de España in Madrid (MAN).<sup>1</sup> That review requires an addendum. A full account of the new installation of MAN's collection must acknowledge the display of some recently acquired antiquities with unknown provenance and dubious history.

The *AJA* statement on the publication of recently acquired antiquities is clear: the journal "will not serve for the announcement or initial scholarly presentation of any object in a private or public collection acquired after December 30, 1973, unless its existence is documented before that date, or it was legally exported from the country of origin. . . . Reviews of exhibitions, catalogues, or publications that do not follow these guidelines should state that the exhibition or publication in question includes material without known archaeological findspot."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this policy is equally clear: to take an unequivocal stand against the illicit antiquities trade and to keep the checkered past of recently acquired objects that do not have archaeological provenance out in the open.<sup>3</sup> Unwittingly, the April 2017 review did not state that MAN's exhibition includes some recently acquired antiquities of dubious origin. For this reason, the following pages should serve as an essential complement to the April 2017 review.

MAN's vast holdings include a set of vases that comes from the collection of Spanish entrepreneur and collector José Luis Várez Fisa. These vases have been tied to the illicit antiquities trade. The story of the vases is complicated but fascinating.<sup>4</sup>

In 1999, the Spanish state purchased a major collection of 181 ancient artifacts from Várez Fisa for the Museo Arqueológico Nacional.<sup>5</sup> La Junta de Calificación, Valoración y Exportación de Bienes del Patrimonio Histórico Español, which is in charge of procurement for state museums, detected no irregularities with the collection.<sup>6</sup> MAN presented the collection in a temporary exhibition from September to November 2003 accompanied by a 517-page

<sup>1</sup> Shaya 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Norman 2005, 135.

<sup>3</sup> Norman 2005, 136.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank David Gill for bringing the Várez Fisa Collection to my attention and Fabio Isman for sharing his research on the collection.

<sup>5</sup> Cabrera Bonet 2003, 6. The collection contains Egyptian, Iberian, Celtiberian, Greek, and Roman objects. The oldest piece is a Predynastic Egyptian vessel (3700–3300 B.C.E.) and the most recent a Late Antique sculpted stone lion. Most of the collection is made up of Greek vases.

<sup>6</sup> Andrés Carretero Pérez (MAN's director), pers. comm. 2018.

catalogue entitled *La colección Várez Fisa en el Museo Arqueológico Nacional*.<sup>7</sup>

In 2006, Italian forensic archaeologist Daniela Rizzo and photographic and document expert Maurizio Pellegrini, both of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Etruria Meridionale at the Villa Giulia, issued a report on the catalogue.<sup>8</sup> Rizzo and Pellegrini were assisting a state prosecutor, Paolo Giorgio Ferri, in identifying archaeological materials that had been illegally excavated and exported from Italy.

Rizzo and Pellegrini's report focuses on a group of vases from the Várez Fisa Collection.<sup>9</sup> They tie many of these vases directly to convicted antiquities dealers Giacomo Medici, Gianfranco Becchina, and Robin Symes. They also match 15 of them to Polaroids seized during the raids of the Medici archive in the Geneva Freeport in 1995, the Becchina archive in Basel in 2001, and the Symes archive on the island of Schinousea in 2006.<sup>10</sup> The Polaroids show some of the Várez Fisa vases covered in dirt and in pieces. Rizzo and Pellegrini trace almost all the vases through catalogues published by various antiquities dealers and auction houses between 1984 and 1999. With this evidence, they conclude that a large quantity of archaeological material in the Várez Fisa Collection is of probable illicit provenance and suggest that archaeological material illegally excavated and exported from Italy was integrated into the collection. The report notes that these materials are exceptional. It finds that MAN does not have any other antiquities of suspected provenance beyond those belonging to the Várez Fisa Collection.

Beginning in 2010, the Italian journalist Fabio Isman published a series of articles detailing the history of the Várez Fisa Collection along with Rizzo and Pellegrini's

findings.<sup>11</sup> According to Isman, there is no evidence for direct dealings between Várez Fisa and Medici, Becchina, or Symes.<sup>12</sup> As with many illicit antiquities, the movement of the vases through dealers' galleries and auction houses obscured their provenance.<sup>13</sup> Isman called on MAN to address the origin and legal status of the vases and to work with the Italian government to determine a just resolution in regard to their ownership.<sup>14</sup>

This reckoning is under way behind the scenes. Andrés Carretero Pérez, MAN's director, explains that the Italian government's claim to the vases is presently under study by the legal services of Spain's Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte. The museum is awaiting their report.<sup>15</sup> While the legal process is slow, Carretero emphasizes that MAN has no intention of maintaining in its collections cultural assets that are in an irregular situation.<sup>16</sup>

Since the reinstallation of the collection in 2014, eight years after Rizzo and Pellegrini's report, the museum has exhibited the vases in its collection. Some are centerpieces in the Greek galleries, which explore Greek social and religious institutions, cultural beliefs, myths, and poetry through figurative pottery. A red-figure column krater with a symposium scene from ca. 460 C.E., for instance, stands at the heart of an exhibition on the Greek symposium.<sup>17</sup> This exhibition is illustrated in the April 2017 review in the *AJA*.<sup>18</sup> Three black-figure amphoras from the late sixth century B.C.E. showing Herakles fighting the Nemean lion, the Amazons, and the Triton are central pieces in a display on Greek heroes.<sup>19</sup> These vases appear identical to vases pictured in Polaroids seized from the Medici archive. MAN's Greek galleries offer no comment on the objects' problematic provenance. The online catalogue

<sup>7</sup> Cabrera Bonet 2003. The catalogue does not give collecting histories for 114 of the 183 objects it includes (Gill 2010a, 20 July).

<sup>8</sup> Pellegrini and Rizzo 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The report gives the MAN inventory numbers for 15 of the vases: 1999/99/36, 1999/99/45, 1999/99/51, 1999/99/53, 1999/99/55, 1999/99/59, 1999/99/60, 1999/99/61, 1999/99/96, 1999/99/97, 1999/99/100, 1999/99/124, 1999/99/138, 1999/99/147, 1999/99/159. The MAN inventory numbers for the other vases can be identified based on photographs and publication records: 1999/99/54, 1999/99/68, 1999/99/78, 1999/99/84, 1999/99/85, 1999/99/88, 1999/99/105, 1999/99/109, 1999/99/153. Definitive research has not been conducted on the rest of the Várez Fisa Collection, but see Gill 2010a, 20 July; 2010b, 20 July.

<sup>10</sup> For these archives, see Watson and Todeschini 2006, 66–71, 292–97, 316–17, 322–24; Isman 2010, 20 July.

<sup>11</sup> Isman 2010; 2010, 20 July; F. Isman, "Antichità: I tesori che l'Italia non rivendica," *Il Messaggero*, 21 April 2012, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Isman 2010, 4.

<sup>13</sup> For Medici's history of laundering of antiquities, see Isman 2010, 20 July; Watson and Todeschini 2006, 136–41, 380–83.

<sup>14</sup> Isman 2010, 4; F. Isman, "Antichità: I tesori che l'Italia non rivendica," *Il Messaggero*, 21 April 2012, 23. Blogs and websites devoted to the illicit antiquities trade also called for action; see, e.g., Gill 2010, 13 July; Flynn 2010, 14 July; Brodie 2012, 20 August.

<sup>15</sup> Andrés Carretero Pérez, pers. comm. 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Andrés Carretero Pérez, pers. comm. 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. no. 1999/99/96.

<sup>18</sup> Shaya 2017, 340, fig. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. nos. 1999/99/53, 1999/99/60, 1999/99/59.

does not fill out the picture; under the rubric “Historia del Objeto,” it simply lists “Colección Várez Fisa.”

The April 2017 review of the installation applauded MAN, among other things, for its close attention to context. However, these vases complicate the story. The gallery frames them in terms of Greek cultural beliefs, but the evidence from Rizzo and Pellegrini suggests that they probably served as furnishings in Etruscan tombs. The gallery does not explore this use, nor can it given the loss of archaeological context. The gallery also lacks an exploration of the modern context of the vases. As evidence for the dealings of Medici, Becchina, and Symes, the vases are key sources for the history of the illicit antiquities trade. Together with other evidence seized from Medici, Becchina, and Symes, they help illuminate a vast network that moved illicit antiquities from the ground, through middlemen, dealers, and auction houses, to collectors and museums. The vases, then, offer MAN an opportunity to highlight this history and the irretrievable loss of information that happens when objects are illicitly removed from archaeological contexts. So far, this opportunity has been missed.

In the final analysis, MAN is an excellent illustration of both the promises and the pitfalls of archaeological collections today. As I wrote in the April 2017 review, the reinstallation of the collection, with its emphasis on context, accessibility, innovative storytelling, and the history of collecting is a model for archaeological museums. However, the vases in the Várez Fisa Collection cannot be ignored. To be sure, curatorial best practices on questions of acquisitions and provenance are quickly evolving. But a forthright account of these vases in the museum would include a full presentation of their legal status and collecting history. This is especially true in light of the larger claims that the museum makes about the importance of context.

Finally, this addendum requires a personal note. It was my error as a reviewer not to have reviewed the scholarship on the vases. I take full responsibility for this mistake and hope that future reviewers will learn from it.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> A reviewer's first resources for collecting histories are museum directors, curators, and catalogues. Some catalogues, however, do not contain detailed collecting histories. Other key resources are the Association of Art Museum Directors object registry, and blogs and websites that investigate looting and antiquities trafficking. The following short list offers a place to start: the Association of Art Museum Directors object registry (<https://aamd.org/object-registry>); *Looting Matters* (<http://lootingmatters.blogspot.com>); the website of the Association for the Research into Crimes Against Art ([www.artcrimeresearch.org](http://www.artcrimeresearch.org)); *Chasing Aphrodite* (<https://chasingaphrodite.com>); the

It is my further hope that this addendum will serve as a reminder of the importance of diligent attention to the collecting histories of all recently acquired antiquities.

Josephine Shaya  
Department of Classical Studies  
The College of Wooster  
Wooster, Ohio 44691  
[jshaya@wooster.edu](mailto:jshaya@wooster.edu)

### Works Cited

- Brodie, N. 2012, 20 August. “Várez Fisa Collection.” *Trafficking Culture*. <http://traffickingculture.org/encyclopedia/case-studies/fisa-collection/>.
- Cabrera Bonet, P., ed. 2003. *La colección Várez Fisa en el Museo Arqueológico Nacional*. Madrid: Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte.
- Flynn, T. 2010, 14 July. “Madrid Museum Shown Red Card for Acquiring Looted Objects.” *Artknows*. <http://tom-flynn.blogspot.com/2010/07/italy-1-spain-0-madrid-museum-shown-red.html>.
- Gill, D. 2010, 13 July. “Madrid: Indifference is Not an Option.” *Looting Matters*. <http://lootingmatters.blogspot.com/2010/07/madrid-indifference-is-not-option.html>.
- . 2010a, 20 July. “Madrid: Sources for the Várez Fisa Collection.” *Looting Matters*. <http://lootingmatters.blogspot.com/2010/07/madrid-sources-for-varez-fisa.html>.
- . 2010b, 20 July. “Madrid: Three Pots from the Geddes Collection.” *Looting Matters*. <http://lootingmatters.blogspot.com/2010/07/madrid-three-pots-from-geddes.html>.
- Isman, F. 2010. “Looted from Italy and Now in a Major Spanish Museum?” *Art Newspaper* 19 (July/August):4.
- . 2010, 20 July. “¡Es una trampa madrileña!” *Il Giornale dell'Arte.com*. [www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/articoli/2010/7/103531.html](http://www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/articoli/2010/7/103531.html).
- Norman, N.J. 2005. “Editorial Policy on the Publication of Recently Acquired Antiquities.” *AJA* 109(2):135–36.
- Pellegrini, M., and D. Rizzo. 2006. *Museo Archeologico Nazionale de Madrid: Collezione Materiale Archeologico Várez Fisa*. Rome: Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Etruria Meridionale at the Villa Giulia.
- Shaya, J. 2017. “Communicating Context: Spain's Newly Renovated Museo Arqueológico Nacional.” *AJA* 121(2): 333–41.
- Watson, P., and C. Todeschini. 2006. *The Medici Conspiracy: The Illicit Journey of Looted Antiquities, from Italy's Tomb Raiders to the World's Greatest Museum*. New York: Public Affairs.

International Council of Museums resource page (<http://icom.museum/resources/>); the website of the International Foundation for Art Research ([www.ifar.org](http://www.ifar.org)); *Illicit Cultural Property* (<http://illicitculturalproperty.com>); the Museum Security Network website and Google Group ([www.toncremers.nl](http://www.toncremers.nl)); the website of Saving Antiquities for Everyone (<http://savingantiquities.org>); *Trafficking Culture* (<http://traffickingculture.org>).