

The Reinstallation of the Getty Villa: Plenty of Beauty but Only Partial Truth

ELIZABETH MARLOWE

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Admirers of ancient art cheered the news in April 2018 that the Getty Villa in Malibu, California, had completed a three-year-long reinstallation of the entire museum.¹ The last major renovations of the galleries occurred between 1997 and 2006, following the relocation of the post-classical collections to the new Getty campus in Brentwood. When the Villa reopened in 2006 in its new incarnation as a museum devoted exclusively to the art of the ancient Mediterranean, the galleries were organized thematically. Objects from different times, places, and media intermingled in spaces devoted to topics such as Gods and Goddesses, Dionysus and the Theater, and Stories of the Trojan War. But the moment was not entirely celebratory. Marion True, the curator whose vision the 2006 installation embodied, had been indicted in Italy the year before on charges of receiving stolen antiquities and conspiring to traffic antiquities, and had been forced to resign in conjunction with the growing scandal around the museum's acquisition practices.² Between 1999 and 2007, the museum returned a total of 46 high-profile antiquities, valued at over \$17 million, to Greece and Italy.³ This was accompanied by an onslaught of negative attention in the press, which chronicled the tribulations of the “world's richest museum” with zeal and occasional *schadenfreude*.

The museum survived the scandals, adopting stringent new acquisitions guidelines in 2006 designed to bring the institution in line with the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transport of Ownership of Cultural Property and foreign ownership laws,⁴ and undertaking a series of collaborations that improved damaged relations with foreign ministries of culture, including exhibitions and conservation work on important objects such as the Chimaera of Arezzo

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¹ Additional figures can be found with this review's abstract on AJA Online (www.ajaonline.org). All photographs are the reviewer's.

² Felch and Frammolino 2011.

³ Watson and Todeschini 2007; Brodie and Bowman Proulx 2014.

⁴ The major revision of the policy was announced in October 2006: www.getty.edu/news/press/center/revised_acquisition_policy_release_102606.html. The current policy, last emended in September 2018, is accessible here: www.getty.edu/about/governance/pdfs/acquisitions_policy.pdf.

in 2009 and the Mozia Charioteer in 2013.⁵ The Getty has also become an international leader in the area of provenance research. The Getty Research Institute, a sister program of the museum, has been working steadily to make the 2.3 million records in its Provenance Index, comprising auction catalogues, dealer stock books, and other archival inventories, freely and publicly available online. Perhaps most significantly, the museum's online collections database sets an industry standard for completeness and transparency, providing the full ownership history and complete bibliography for every object in the collection, including names (such as those of notorious antiquities traffickers Robert Hecht and Robin Symes) that the museum would no doubt prefer to keep in the shadows.⁶

Given this background and these recent initiatives, the top-to-bottom reinstallation of the gallery spaces that began in 2016 presents an excellent opportunity for the public to see how the chastened museum has reimagined its identity and mission in this new era. As I point out in this review, there are indeed glimpses, in the reinstalled galleries, of a new outlook. In keeping with leading trends in critical museology, some displays explain not only what the objects are but also how that knowledge has been generated through particular research methods; and several displays recount the museum's own history and how and why it acquired particular objects. Unfortunately, however, this attitude of transparency and self-reflexivity applies only to objects acquired up to J. Paul Getty's death. Conveniently for the museum, this occurred in 1976, just a few years after the passage of the UNESCO Convention. As a result, none of the displays address the museum's dubious acquisition practices during the 30-year period when it was, arguably, the world's leading destination for looted antiquities.

Before proceeding, a note about this review and the *American Journal of Archaeology's* publication policy is in order. The policy in effect as this review is in preparation requires that a review of an exhibition or publication that includes material that either surfaced

after 1973 (the date the *AJA* adopted the policy) or was illegally exported should state that the exhibition or publication includes material without a known archaeological findspot.⁷ Legal vs. illegal exportation and known vs. unknown archaeological findspot are, however, two separate issues, as the case of J. Paul Getty's acquisitions makes clear: he was buying antiquities in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, so those objects fall clearly on one side of the 1973 bright line. But almost nothing he acquired had a known archaeological findspot. In my view, the lack of a known archaeological findspot should be pointed out in all cases, regardless of the date of the object's surfacing or the legality of its exportation; and if an object was acquired in violation of the UNESCO accord, that fact, too, should be stated clearly.⁸ In this case, unless otherwise noted, and to the best of my knowledge, *all objects mentioned in this review lack an archaeological findspot*. As far as the legality of their exportation, for all objects with an acquisition number higher than 70 (i.e., that were acquired by the museum after 1970) mentioned in this review, I give the information, based on the Getty's online collections database, relevant to the date of the object's exportation from its probable country of origin. Additional information about the ownership history of all objects in the Getty's collection is available in the database. It should be noted, furthermore, that all objects discussed in this review have prior publication, at the very least in the Getty's online database; most have also appeared in print publications of the Getty's catalogues as well.

PLEASURES FOR THE EYE AND MIND

With these preliminaries out of the way, let me begin by saying that there is much in these reinstalled galleries to celebrate. The villa itself, modeled on the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum and set amidst lush gardens in a rolling canyon above the Pacific Coast Highway, remains one of the most spectacular settings—possibly the most spectacular—for the display of ancient art anywhere in the world. The installations are, in a word, exquisite. The lighting, cabinetry, and signage embody the highest professional standards. Particularly praiseworthy is the exploitation of natural light in the display of sculpture and mosaics around the

⁵ On the Chimaera, see Iozzo 2009. The Charioteer came to Malibu as part of a major loan exhibition about Sicily; see Lyons et al. 2013. He went home with a new, \$200,000 seismic isolation base.

⁶ J. Paul Getty Museum, "Collection," www.getty.edu/art/collection/; search for inv. no.

⁷ *AJA* Editorial Policy, www.ajaonline.org/submissions/editorial-policy, as of February 2020.

⁸ Marlowe 2013, 106–8.



FIG. 1. Second-floor peristyle of the reinstalled Getty Villa, Malibu.

peristyle on the second floor (fig. 1). Exhibition space has been maximized; a former cloakroom is now given over entirely to Athenian vases; an upstairs computer room has become the “Roman Treasury.” Rarely seen frescoes from a cubiculum of the Villa of Numerius Popidius Florus now command their own handsome gallery.⁹ Large, airy spaces have been allotted to whole classes of material—Etruscan amber,¹⁰ Bactrian metal-

⁹ Inv. nos. 70.AG.91, 72.AG.79.1–2. The Getty owns three fresco panels from Cubiculum 4 of this villa, which was excavated (and published) at Boscoreale by the local landowner in 1906. The date and circumstances of the frescoes’ exportation to Switzerland, where they were purchased by the Getty, is unknown (or at least not stated in the database).

¹⁰ Causey 2012. Most of the Etruscan amber was trafficked via Giacomo Medici (who eventually served ten years in prison in Italy for trafficking in stolen goods) to Los Angeles dealer Bruce McNall; see J. Felch, “Getty Studies Its Antiquities,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 January 2013). It was purchased from McNall by Gordon McLendon, who donated it to the museum in 1976 and 1977. The vastly inflated appraisal that then-Curator Jiri Frel produced for this collection (McLendon paid \$20,000 for the ambers; Frel appraised the donation at \$20 million) at-

work¹¹—that are rarely featured in standard narratives or museum displays of Greek and Roman art. The lively display of Roman portrait heads has avoided the monotony typical of such installations, alternating figures young and old, male and female, bronze and marble, leftward- and rightward-facing. A large, ground-floor gallery devoted to “The Classical World in Context” complements the museum’s core holdings in Greek, Roman, and Etruscan art through loan shows of material from neighboring cultures. For the first year after the reopening, it featured Palmyrene reliefs from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, and an exhibition of Assyrian works from the British Museum opened in October for a three-year run.

tracted the attention of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, but only to McLendon. The Getty’s own lawyers eventually picked up the thread, uncovering Frel’s widespread, fraudulent donation scheme. Frel was demoted as a result in 1984 and resigned in 1986.

¹¹ The Getty purchased four batches (“treasures”) of metalwork that first surfaced on the Swiss market between 1981 and 1986 (Pfrommer 1993).

Also noteworthy is the use of digital technology. Far too many museums have fallen into the trap in recent years of trying to attract younger audiences with the latest digital gadgets and high-tech gallery enhancements. Neither as entertaining as an actual video game nor beneficial to the actual viewing experience, such geegaws rarely satisfy museumgoers. The team at the Getty Villa, however, has thought carefully about how to use digital technology not for its own sake but as a tool to enrich the visitor's encounter with the objects. A room of ancient glass, organized by manufacturing technique, includes a fixed computer screen beside each case. These present videos of modern glass artists creating pieces using the ancient methods. I am also happy to report that all of these videos are available online, not only on the Villa's YouTube channel but also on the Khan Academy website, where they are easily discoverable by millions of students. Equally illuminating are the screens installed beside cases of tiny objects such as gems, coins, and jewelry (online fig. 1).¹² These provide superb, high-resolution photographs of the works from multiple angles and all sides, as well as additional textual information beyond what is given in the gallery labels. Viewers can zoom in on details, flip coins over, and, most exciting, physically toggle back and forth from the actual object to the greatly enlarged images. For gems in particular, clicking on the photographs of these often tiny bits of stone—some no bigger than a fingernail, whose titles like “Youth Leading a Horse” or “Aphrodite Riding a Goose” seem completely implausible based on the meager scratches visible to the naked eye—is a bit like biting into an expensive chocolate bonbon: at last you can experience for yourself the tantalizing, promised delights.¹³ There indeed is Aphrodite riding a goose! Seeing a minute surface groove transform into a sword, a little dip into a lion, feels like magic.

Throughout the galleries, the contemporary visitor experience has been prioritized over age-old professional conventions. On the object labels, for example, the “tombstone”—the bulleted points of fact that usually fill the top of the plaque with information of varying relevance (and comprehensibility) to the average viewer—has been reconceived. After the title of the

work comes a small black-and-white photograph, so the label can be easily matched to the correct item in the case. Ordinary English words are used instead of specialized jargon (e.g., “wine cup” instead of “kylix”). The name of the donor and the accession number are presented unobtrusively at the bottom of the plaque. The “chat” portion of the labels are a standard 50–75 words in length, and further information about at least one item in every case is available on the audio guide.

The labels reveal not only careful thinking about visitor experience but also deep engagement with many of the most recent approaches to ancient art and material culture. The range of issues addressed is wide. Some are the standard purview of ancient art history: artists' oeuvres, the development of naturalism, iconography, lost Greek originals, the carving techniques of Roman portraiture. Others present aspects of the “object biography,” an approach that valorizes not just the moment of the object's creation but also its shifting uses, meanings, and forms over time, all the way up to the present. On an amphora with Athena and Herakles, a close-up photograph and explanatory text highlight the repair the vessel underwent in antiquity via the attachment of a new mouth from an entirely different vessel.¹⁴ This easily overlooked detail offers a fascinating glimpse of the amphora actually being used by ordinary people in the ancient world, people who broke things, just as we do, and who cared about them enough to have them repaired.

Modern conservation histories are also embraced in many of the labels. Visitors familiar with the two-color line drawings showing the ancient and modern elements of the sculpture in the new Greek and Roman galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York will be especially impressed with the diagrams provided for works like the Leda and Swan group.¹⁵ These distinguish among four categories of material within a work: (1) ancient and original; (2) ancient but from a different work and added in the 18th century; (3) new addition made in the 18th century; and (4) 20th-century restoration. A didactic panel on “Restoring Sculpture” teases out the shifting values behind these interventions, including those of the not-too-distant past that saw many 18th-century additions

¹² See AJA Online for additional, online-only figures.

¹³ Youth Leading a Horse, inv. no. 85.AN.165: first surfaced at Christie's, London, in 1894. Aphrodite Riding a Goose, inv. no. 81.AN.76.36: first surfaced in Switzerland in 1973.

¹⁴ Inv. no. 86.AE.85: first documented in a private German collection in 1968.

¹⁵ Inv. no. 70.AA.110: found on the Palatine Hill, Villa Mag-nani, 1775; exported to London by 1779.

removed. The Getty's stance is spelled out explicitly: "today curators and conservators seek to preserve the different phases of a sculpture's history."

The new installation also devotes several galleries to the history of collecting. This is another topic that, like conservation history, has flourished in the context of the field's recent orientation toward object biographies. A beautiful inlaid-marble gallery on the ground floor is the first of three small spaces that focus on the museum's founder, J. Paul Getty. A series of Aphrodite figures builds up a picture of Getty the collector and the man, who, we are told in the label text, was married five times, "readily admitted that he 'enjoyed the company of women,'" and purchased many Aphrodites right from the start of his collecting career. A *Crouching Venus* occupies the center of the gallery; the label tells us that Getty had her head reset "more than once" before it satisfied him.¹⁶ Another female figure, a marble head, is presented as Getty's choice for the cover of his book *The Joys of Collecting*.¹⁷ Elsewhere, we read that Getty wrote "modern?" in a 1939 auction catalogue beside the photograph of a small terracotta figure of a sensuously posed woman reclining on a bed.¹⁸ Nevertheless, we learn, Getty was "a risk-taker in art collecting as well as the oil business," and was "willing to take a chance" with a bid of just 10 pounds. The object is on view today with a label identifying it as a modern forgery. The audio guide gives further context, both on the unmeetable demand in the late 19th century for Tanagra figurines (what this purported to be) and on the thermoluminescence testing used to detect terracotta forgeries today. The audio guide also discusses the decision to put this object on display, as part of a "holistic view of Getty and his collecting practices," rather than hiding it away. Elsewhere on the ground floor is Getty's prized Herakles statue.¹⁹ Excavated at the site of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli in 1790 and owned by William Petty-Fitzmaurice, Earl of Shelburne and first Marquess of Lansdowne, the Herakles allowed Getty to fancy himself both a modern-day English lord and a Roman emperor and inspired the construction of his own Roman villa.

On the second floor, a gallery devoted to the earlier history of antiquities collecting includes objects that passed through the hands of the Dukes of Ferrara, the Duke of Arundel, Lord Elgin, Cardinal Chigi, and Martine-Marie-Pol de Béhague, a French countess and renowned patron of the arts active in the early 20th century. Getty, the self-made billionaire (or relatively self-made), thus becomes the latest link in this grand aristocratic chain. But the gallery does not shy away from telling uglier stories as well, including that of a small bronze figure of Luna, seized from the Netherlands and destined for Hitler's planned museum of "Aryan" art in his hometown in Linz, Austria, before being recovered by allied troops.²⁰

In addition to those that explore object biographies, other labels at the Getty Villa consider how we know what we think we know about ancient artworks. Object details are highlighted as evidence, and scholarly paradigms are presented as modes of interpretation. The label for a water jar attributed to the Kleophrades Painter begins: "Attribution to an individual painter involves patient scrutiny of decorative work, composition, and figure drawing, together with comparison to other vessels," and then goes on to identify the diagnostic features of this particular piece.²¹ The audio guide for a different vase, featuring an unusually complicated set of handles, acknowledges frankly that we do not really know what vases of this form were used for and that our only clue is their appearance in painted scenes featuring returning warriors.²² It is refreshing to hear this embrace of subjectivity and epistemology instead of the voice of anonymous institutional authority that prevails in many museums.

The subjectivity of the curators comes through delightfully in the audio guide, which names them by name, pushes the object interpretations further than the labels do, and does so with punchier prose. For example, while the label might say that "the shiny black glaze, finely fluted body, and ivy wreath around the neck imitate the appearance of metal vessels," the audio guide sends the point home: "the impression of luxury is sometimes as good as the real thing." The

¹⁶ Inv. no. 55.AA.10.

¹⁷ Inv. no. 56.AA.19.

¹⁸ Inv. no. 78.AK.38: in a private collection in London by 1938.

¹⁹ Inv. no. 70.AA.109: in London by 1792.

²⁰ Inv. no. 96.AB.38. The figure was restituted to the Netherlands in 1947. "By 1963," the figure was in a private Swiss collection; how it got there from the Netherlands is not explained in the database.

²¹ Inv. no. 82.AE.7: first surfaced on the Swiss art market in 1982.

²² Inv. no. 78.AE.320: in a Belgian private collection by 1919.

commentaries are often funny (Associate Curator David Saunders on a vase depicting a purveyor of love spells: “obviously we don’t know the efficacy of any of these spells”), informal (Saunders notes a pair of “manboobs” in a scene of comic actors), and unafraid to make broad comparisons to the modern world (Curator Kenneth Lapatin compares Getty’s menagerie to those of Assyrian kings, Roman emperors, and Michael Jackson). The outside experts who show up occasionally on the audio guide speak with a noticeably more formal tone; those portions feel more like lectures and less like a tour through the galleries with a knowledgeable friend.

OPPORTUNITIES MISSED AND STORIES NOT TOLD

These elements of the reinstallation reveal a progressive stance toward questions of subjectivity, epistemology, transparency, accessibility, and responsibility to the wider community. But this attitude is not ubiquitous at the Villa—and indeed, seems to be the exception rather than the rule. The reinstallation is the brainchild of Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, who was appointed in 2012 by James Cuno, president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust. Many outside observers were already wondering about the sincerity of the museum’s reforms given the choice of Cuno, one of the most vocal advocates for a more or less unfettered antiquities market, to lead the institution in 2011.²³ At the time of his hire, Cuno spoke of his desire to appoint a director of the Getty Villa with “an appetite for risk in acquiring extraordinary works of art,” a sentiment very much at odds with the museum’s ostensibly chastened ethos of transparency and international cooperation.²⁴

In a blog post titled “A New Vision for the Collection at the Getty Villa,” that appeared just before the reopening, Potts makes his ideological commitments plain to see.²⁵ He criticizes the previous installation for prioritizing “social life in the ancient world” over the objects’ “stature as works of art.” The new installation reverses these priorities, he explains, by jettisoning the thematic organization in favor of a strictly chronological one. This not only restores Getty’s vision of Greek and Roman antiquities, “which he acquired primarily

as works of art” (and not, it is implied, as testimony of ancient cultures or social life), but also allows audiences to understand “how and why styles, subjects, and ways of making art differ across space and time.” Several points are notable about this statement. First, the vision of the discipline that Potts reinscribes here is arguably two paradigm shifts old: prior both to the “new art history” of the 1980s and 1990s (when social art history eclipsed the old histories of style) and to the material turn of the last decade or so (whereby this binary was itself rejected, and scholars considered how objects’ material properties, including their style, shaped their shifting uses and meanings over time). Furthermore, in pitting art/beauty/style against context/culture/social life, Potts repeats an argument made many times by Cuno, Philippe de Montebello (former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), and others for why the loss of archaeological context should not trouble us too deeply, and, by extension, why it is acceptable for museums to acquire looted objects.²⁶ Finally, it is remarkable that Potts’ statement makes no reference to any of the recent troubles at the Villa nor to the policy changes enacted to move the institution forward. The silence speaks volumes about what kind of transparency we should expect at the reinstalled museum.

Despite some departures from it here and there, Potts’ vision prevails in the reinstallation. There are still some thematic displays, but they are not explicitly indicated as such. A small gallery on the second floor contains only images of animals (a lion, some elephants, and a bear), but it is identified on maps and signs as just more “Roman Sculpture”—too bad for visitors with children who don’t already know this little collection is here. Conversely, to anyone who hasn’t taken an art history class, the darkened side gallery near the entrance featuring nothing but rows and rows of spotlighted Greek vases must be a rather daunting prospect (online fig. 2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this gallery was noticeably less crowded than the others on the day I visited. This is a shame, for in fact here, too, we can discern surreptitious themes that would likely have wide appeal if they were clearly marked. Several cases, for example, explore the topic of the dinner party, with all its various forms of pleasure and excess represented in delightful, occasionally eye-popping detail: some

²³ Rosenbaum 2011, 10 May.

²⁴ Brodie and Bowman Proulx 2014, 416 n. 21.

²⁵ Potts 2018, 2 April.

²⁶ Cuno 2010, as well as the collected essays by prominent museum officials in Cuno 2012.

highly acrobatic drinking, vomiting, drunken singing (while a slave collects the singer's urine in a jar), and multiple forms of carnal pleasure, all carefully explicated in the labels. But none of these details are visible from the doorway, and no effort has been made to entice the wary, the bored, or the not-already-in-the-know to wade into this sea of orange and black.

Indeed, the glimpses of progressive art history discussed above—the valorization of noncanonical materials or works from the geographic periphery, the acknowledgement of subjectivity, the grappling with epistemology, the engagement with object biography—are largely overshadowed by more conservative approaches everywhere else. The Greek galleries still prioritize and naturalize standard tropes and teleologies in the history of style. A pair of small bronze lions are displayed side-by-side in a “Decorative Bronzework” case in the “Archaic and Classical Greece” gallery; the less naturalistic one is dated to 550 BCE, the more naturalistic one to 500–480 BCE (fig. 2).²⁷ These dates appear in the tombstone portion of the label, thus occupying the discursive space of fact; the chat is left blank. It would seem that the dates are, in fact, the point of this particular display. The lions' juxtaposition allows visitors to witness the miracle of the Greek stylistic revolution from the Archaic to the Classical right before their eyes. Never mind that these dates are pure conjecture (both objects surfaced on the art market), their relation to the ostensible Greek miracle a product of purely circular logic (the style proves the dates; the dates prove the miraculous evolution of style at this moment).

The supremacy of the style associated with classical Greece is, of course, the foundational value judgment of the discipline of art history, and the reinstallation of the Getty Villa as a whole does little to challenge it. The progressive intentions behind the dedication of a gallery to regions beyond the centers of Greece and Rome are somewhat undermined when Potts, in his “New Vision” statement, singles out for attention only the moment “when the Greeks developed the first fully naturalistic vision of the human figure” in his overview of the museum. No wonder, then, that Roman art is still framed primarily as a derivation of Greek art, with



FIG. 2. Installation with two small bronze lions (J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. nos. 96.AB.76, 96.AC.81) in the Archaic and Classical Greece gallery on the ground floor of the Getty Villa.

works that conform most closely to the classical style given pride of place in the center of the main upstairs galleries, and those that don't fit that mold (scenes of Mithraic sacrifice, Late Antique geometric heads, tombstones from Phrygia and Palmyra) are lumped together and relegated to a far corner of the peristyle. Unhellenic Roman cultural practices, such as funerary imagery celebrating middle-class professions, are represented by a single object at most (here, a sarcophagus with meticulously detailed scenes of wool working²⁸), and no additional wall text draws attention to the ways they depart from the prevailing narrative about Rome's cultural indebtedness to Greece. Roman Egypt gets its own small gallery, but it is devoted almost entirely to Fayum portraits, the genre of Roman-Egyptian artistic production that fits most comfortably into the classical paradigm. Indeed, Potts likens these mummy face panels to “European-style portraits” in his “New Vision” blog post.

²⁷ Inv. no. 96.AB.76: surfaced in Paris in 1989 and sold to the Fleischmans; and inv. no. 96.AC.81: surfaced in London in 1989 and sold to the Fleischmans. The Fleischman collection was acquired by the Getty in 1996.

²⁸ Inv. no. 86.AA.701: surfaced on the U.S. market in 1986.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the new installation is that the rich, illuminating exploration of the history of collecting before and during the life of J. Paul Getty comes to an abrupt halt with Getty's death in 1976. Thus, no displays address the museum's collecting practices in the era after the 1970 UNESCO Convention—which means that none of the activity that led to the scandals and repatriations of the past two decades is mentioned anywhere in the museum. Indeed, there is arguably less transparency about past controversies than there was prior to the reinstallation, as the Getty Kouros, which used to be displayed with a frank and informative set of labels carefully explaining the evidence for and against its authenticity, has been removed from view entirely.²⁹ This is a loss both for the general public, for whom forgeries are always a matter of deep fascination, but also for students and scholars of art history, for whom this is a touchstone in the history of the discipline.

The decision not to discuss any of the recent Getty stories concerning looting is, in my view, a mistake, because the paths by which objects come to the museum often have profound material and intellectual consequences.³⁰ The former can be illustrated by the case of an over-life-sized Roman portrait statue with a long ownership history going back to the 18th century, purchased by Getty in 1972.³¹ The audio guide recounts that the figure was headless when Getty bought it, though it came with an old photograph showing the statue still intact. So when the head turned up in a Manhattan gallery in 2016, a Getty curator recognized it, and the severed parts have since been reunited.³² The subtext is self-congratulatory, but the audio guide is not shy about the violence of the decapitation, which must have occurred at some point between 1937 and 1972: someone “took a power drill and started drilling into the neck. They took a blunt instrument to the neck, and they kept hammering and chipping until

the whole thing broke away.” “Sometimes,” conservator Eduardo Sanchez explains, “it’s more valuable for an object to be sold in parts than it is as a whole.” All true, and an important story to tell; but what is absent here is any mention of the indirect role that institutions like the Getty have played in this violence by supporting the market for ancient artworks despite suspicious breaks and other indicators of recent looting and deliberate damage. Other works on view in the new galleries bear some of these signs, including four individual figures from the front of a Muse sarcophagus, also acquired in 1972.³³ The figures appear to have been carefully separated from one another with a sharp tool, presumably with the goal of making nine sales (one for each of the Muses this sarcophagus almost certainly featured) instead of one (fig. 3 and online fig. 3). Something similar seems to have happened with a group of Vesuvian fresco fragments purchased in 1983, each of which is centered on a neatly framed figural group (fig. 4).³⁴ The relatively small size and marketable compositions of these fragments suggest strongly that looters extracted them from a larger, intact ensemble, perhaps a whole room or villa. These objects thus raise the question: is it worth it? How much damage to artworks and archaeological sites will we countenance in order to be able to enjoy beautiful fragments like these halfway around the world from their place of origin? Rather than hoping visitors will not notice, or will not know how to read the suspicious break lines, the museum could explain the shifting ways those questions have been answered over time and invite visitors to reflect critically on the issue and form their own opinion.

Those are some of the material consequences of looting. The intellectual consequences are evident in the reinstalled Getty Villa when we are told that a gold wreath of laurel leaves could have been either a votive offering to Apollo or an adornment of the dead; or that a set of horse armor could have been used in actual battle, in a ceremony, in a warrior's burial, or in a ruler's burial.³⁵ The (unstated) reason why we do not

²⁹ Inv. no. 85.AA.40: surfaced on the Swiss market in 1983.

³⁰ Chippindale and Gill 1993.

³¹ Inv. no. 72.AA.153 (body): in the Barberini family collection by 1758; in the hands of a private Italian dealer before 1908; in the hands of another dealer (identity and nationality unspecified in the Getty's database) by 1937; and sold to the Getty by a New York dealer in 1972. It cannot be determined from the information provided in the museum database when this statue was exported from Italy.

³² Inv. no. 2016.38 (head): in France by 2000, according to the online database.

³³ Inv. nos. 72.AA.90.1–4: in New York by 1967. The Getty owns a fifth fragment, apparently of the same sarcophagus but not contiguous with the other four. It is not on view in the gallery but is shown in a photograph in the online database.

³⁴ Inv. nos. 83.AG.222.2, 83.AG.222.3.1, 83.AG.222.4.2: first surfaced on the Swiss market in 1983.

³⁵ Wreath, inv. no. 92.AM.89.1: surfaced in London in 1991.



FIG. 3. Detail of figures from a Muse sarcophagus (inv. nos. 72.AA.90.1–4), showing the careful, deliberate separation of the figures from one another.

know the answers is because we do not know anything about the context in which these objects were found. Likewise, imagine what we might have learned if the “more than thirty fragments” of a life-sized, multi-figural marble statue group depicting Alexander the Great and an assortment of other figures, all now in the Getty collection, had been excavated by archaeologists rather than by looters, who no doubt removed only the marketable fragments from the site, leaving behind untold quantities of now-irretrievable evidence about the group and its context.³⁶ Sometimes, the historical ignorance that results from looting is presented, albeit subtly, as a virtue. In the Getty’s Cycladic gallery,

Horse armor, inv. nos. 83.AC.7.1–3: surfaced on the Swiss market in 1983.

³⁶ Inv. nos. 77.AA.27 and 77.AA.28, heads of Alexander and one of his companions, are on view in the gallery. The ensemble, which included “a goddess, Herakles, a flute player, and several other figures, as well as animals and birds,” according to the online database, surfaced with Robin Symes in London, from whom it was purchased by the Getty.

the very dark blue walls and bright spotlights give the sculptures a spectral glow, creating a seductive aura of mystery (online fig. 4). But there is a very specific reason why the civilization that produced these stylized marble figurines is a mystery to us. It is a direct consequence of the scale and thoroughness of their looting in the 20th century—looting that occurred to feed the demand of buyers like the Getty.³⁷ The reinstalled Villa galleries would have been an ideal place to invite visitors to consider the paradox of antiquities collecting in the post-UNESCO Convention era: that it was only objects whose origins were not known that could be bought and sold with impunity, thereby incentivizing all parties involved to ensure the erasure of contextual information. Indeed, the most interesting revelations to come out of the recent exposés of the museum show how actively Getty museum officials were themselves wrestling with these paradoxes. Curator Arthur Houghton advocated a practice of “optical due diligence” (i.e., giving the appearance of having done due diligence) so as to avoid “certain knowledge” about where new acquisitions were coming from; but, in his 1986 resignation letter, he criticized “curatorial avarice” and warned that the only way the museum could continue to ignore the illegalities of its practices was to go down a “path of self-enforced ignorance of fact.”³⁸ Getty Director John Walsh’s handwritten notes from 1987 document a conversation in which CEO Harold Williams asked, “Are we willing to buy stolen property for some higher aim?”³⁹ This higher aim is the very one recently championed by the Getty’s current CEO, James Cuno, who argues that the value of the encounter with beauty trumps all other concerns—no matter what was lost in getting it there, a work of art is better off in a public vitrine than in the ground.⁴⁰

The reason the Getty should discuss its recent history in the gallery is not to air dirty laundry or to do public penance. It is to acknowledge the complexity of the issues involved, and to invite the public into the critical conversations that the museum has been having behind closed doors for the last 30 years. Rather than pretending, in the gallery label, that everything with the bronze Victorious Youth is hunky-dory and hoping that visitors did not read the latest coverage in

³⁷ Chippindale and Gill 1993.

³⁸ Felch and Frammolino 2011, 61, 71–72.

³⁹ Felch and Frammolino 2011, 218.

⁴⁰ Cuno 2010.



FIG. 4. Three fresco fragments, probably from the Vesuvian region, centered as framed, figural compositions (left to right: inv. nos. 83.AG.222.2, 83.AG.222.3.1, 83.AG.222.4.2).

the *Guardian*, Bloomberg News, or the *New York Times* about Italy's ongoing ownership claim, the museum could present the debate openly in a wall panel.⁴¹ Visitors could be encouraged to draw their own conclusions about whether or not an ancient statue (possibly a copy of an original by the Greek artist Lysippos) found in international waters off the coast of Italy by Italian fishermen, snuck ashore, and eventually smuggled out of Italy to the German market, constitutes looted Italian cultural patrimony.

⁴¹ Inv. no. 77.AB.30: found by fishermen off the coast of Fano, in northeastern Italy, in 1964. Charges of theft against the fishermen, who promptly sold the statue to a local antiquities dealer, were dismissed in 1968 when Italian courts ruled that the findspot was beyond the boundary of Italian territorial waters. But the statue was smuggled out of Italy without an export license, reaching Germany by 1971, where it was purchased by the Getty in 1977. Italy has been pressing for its return since 2006. Li and Sargent 2016; see also G. Pianigiani, "Italian Court Rules Getty Museum Must Return a Prized Bronze," *New York Times*, 4 December 2018.

This kind of "radical transparency," where multiple perspectives on controversial matters are presented openly in museum spaces, would go a long way toward rebuilding public trust.⁴² At the moment, trust continues to be undermined not only by the silences but by occasional hints in the gallery that the museum knows more about the origins of its looted holdings than it is letting on. A life-sized eagle has long been thought to have come from Bubon, the site of a sebastieion in southern Turkey whose looting in the 1960s has been tied to a large cache of bronze sculptures that surfaced on the Swiss and American markets in subsequent years.⁴³ Is the museum endorsing this

⁴² Marstine 2011, 14–17.

⁴³ Inv. no. 72.AB.151: the online collections database suggests that the eagle passed through the hands of Robert Hecht and Robin Symes before it was purchased by the Getty from French and Company in 1972. There is no documentation of its origins or exportation. Its alleged association with Bubon first appeared in print in Vermeule 1980, 188; on the Bubon bronzes, see Lubos 2016.



FIG. 5. Mosaic from a bath building at Antioch (inv. no. 70.AH.96.1).

theory in the label, which says nothing about Bubon but acknowledges that the eagle “was likely part of a sculptural composition representing Jupiter or an emperor”?⁴⁴ What is the full story behind three small bronzes—one identified as Roma or Virtus, one that is “probably Ceres,” and a relief depicting two men in togas—whose gallery panel claims that they constitute a “Group of Figures from a Monument” that may have been a “sculpture of a chariot”?⁴⁵ In both of these cases, one would very much like to know where the information came from, what else was said, and what the museum is doing with the information now (e.g., reaching out to the relevant foreign cultural officials?).

WHY CONTEXT MATTERS

The Late Antique mosaic now hanging in the upstairs peristyle and featuring animals in geometric frames was probably not the first work Timothy Potts had in mind when he said he wants visitors “to see

these great treasures as beautiful and fascinating works of *art*” (italics original) (fig. 5).⁴⁶ When we view this mosaic at eye level and up close, we are struck by the heavy outlines and slightly cartoonish qualities of the hare, the awkward overlapping of the birds, the imprecision of the geometric shapes. But in this case, the wall label provides contextual information that enables us to reconsider this harsh aesthetic judgment. It features a photograph of the mosaic *in situ*, marking the threshold of the frigidarium at a bath building in Antioch, where it was excavated in 1938. To eyes that were five or six feet away, at an oblique angle, and in motion, as bathers heading for the cold plunge would have been, the heavy lines and simple forms would have enhanced the legibility of the imagery. The label further disabuses us of our anachronistic judgments by explaining the larger setting: “Although the bath was small in scale, its fine construction and lavish decoration attest to the wealth and taste of the prosperous landowners in the countryside surrounding Antioch.” This is why context matters, and why it is easy to agree with (now former) Assistant Curator Alexis Belis who tells us in the audio guide that this is one of her favorite mosaics because we have such good documentation about its ancient setting. Context and style are not antithetical

⁴⁴ The discussion on the online collections database is also silent about the alleged association with Bubon but includes all the Bubon bibliography in which the eagle is mentioned.

⁴⁵ Inv. nos. 84.AB.670 and 671 surfaced with London-based dealer Robin Symes in 1984; inv. no. 84.AB.109 surfaced in 1982 with Maurice Tempelman. The online database says the three figures were “reportedly found together.” An earlier exhibition catalogue linked a fourth piece to the group, a small bronze figure of Victory with a cornucopia, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Kozloff and Mitten 1988, 329–43). The troubling ownership history of these objects was pointed out by Gill (1998).

⁴⁶ Inv. no. 70.AH.96.1. The mosaic was excavated and then distributed to the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass., in 1938. It was deaccessioned in 1970 and sold to the Getty that year.

ways of understanding ancient art; context helps us avoid misunderstanding style, or mistaking our own assumptions and viewing practices for those of the ancient world. This is why the loss of context for most of the artworks on view at the Villa remains a tragedy, and this is why it is incumbent on the museum to be completely forthright about what it knows, what it surmises, what it questions, and so on, about the objects in the collection. There are signs in the new galleries that the curators are pushing toward this kind of openness about ownership histories, object biography, and epistemology, but there is still more work to be done.

Elizabeth Marlowe
Art Department
Colgate University
13 Oak Drive
Hamilton, New York 13346
emarlowe@colgate.edu

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