

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Illicit Antiquities Scandal: What It Has Done to Classical Archaeology Collections

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THE MEDICI CONSPIRACY: THE ILLICIT JOURNEY OF LOOTED ANTIQUITIES FROM ITALY'S TOMB RAIDERS TO THE WORLD'S GREATEST MUSEUMS, by *Peter Watson and Cecilia Todeschini*. Pp. xx + 354, figs. 16, pls. 25. PublicAffairs, New York 2006. \$26.95. ISBN 978-1-58648-402-6 (cloth).

We can expect a book with revelations of this kind to prompt a strong reaction from the powerful in the acquiring museums, with talk of world heritage and cosmopolitan culture. They may particularly grumble in feeling that U.S. museums are now being targeted by the more prosperous countries of origin seeking to recover what was taken (while poorer countries of origin such as Albania may not have the resources to pursue this route effectively). There are at least two reasons why they might be targeted—if indeed they are. One is admirable: U.S. laws and their enforcement by U.S. courts are such that wrongdoing can be revealed, proven, and reversed in a way that may be hard in other jurisdictions. One is not admirable: the common close nexus in the United States of museums holding charitable privileges with energetic private collectors who are also patrons and benefactors, the two interests working together with the celebratory curators, attributors, and identifiers—a kind of partnership that has long seemed so productive in taking ambitious U.S. museums forward—may come to be seen as having a darker side that makes it a mixed, even a cursed blessing. We live in a world of sovereign nation-states; if a sovereign nation-state resolves that its patrimony should not cross its frontiers, then cosmopolitans in other lands should respect that sovereign decision rather than imagine they have some cultured right of access to the stuff.

Decades, often many decades, ago nearly all the countries where classical antiquities are to be found passed protective legislation to ensure they were no longer legally exported. Accordingly, it would be expected, the free market in other lands for classical objects should by now be nearly completely restricted to “recycling” objects from the old collections that had left their lands of origin before the bar came down. That has not happened: the great U.S. museums, old and new, notably the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, have continued to acquire and present classical objects new to the world,

such as the Getty's great and perfect kouros and the Metropolitan's Euphronios krater, as astonishing and splendid as those masterpieces such as the Venus de Milo in the Louvre, which came out in the previous era.¹

So, what has been going on? There have been occasional glimpses all is not well: a wonderful Egyptian sculpture is given a knock as it is transported from the London to the New York premises of one of the world's great auction houses, and its ancient “stone” disintegrates into a modern mess of wood shavings and plaster; one or another great museum, under lawyers' pressure from Italy or Greece or Turkey, reluctantly returns some masterpiece while avoiding any admission of criminality or guilt. Italian full-time professional tomb robbers publish their memoirs, prompting again the question, “What happens to their loot once they have sold it?” Thomas Hoving, ever the mischievous and charismatic one-time director of the Metropolitan Museum, has often made it clear he enjoyed its world of careering games; he called its Euphronios krater the “hot pot” not only because it was the most expensive Greek vase in history.²

It happens that a number of criminal investigations and subsequent trials have recently revealed and documented the workings of this hidden world. Behind the neatly trimmed cuts in a chic butchers' shop window, in which all evidence of blood that might upset the squeamish has been drained, is the stinking and knifing violence of the slaughterhouse floor; behind the elegance of these wonderful new finds is a dirty and wicked world of theft and criminality. This excellent book reveals that world; it is vivid, lively, eye-opening, often very comic—and deeply, deeply dispiriting. In its 21 breathless chapters, the reader is given a range of scenarios that even John Grisham would struggle to fit within a single thriller: heists in museums, nighttime looting in Tuscan olive groves, police raids in the Geneva Freeport, mysterious deaths in the cellar, phone taps, hidden laboratories, religious cults in Japan. Sleaze and hypocrisy ooze from the characters who flit through these shadowy worlds—from the flashy antiquities galleries in Switzerland to the flattering salons where the world's “great museums” entertain their generous patrons and benefactors.

Our own experience of life in its many aspects inclines us generally to prefer cock-up theories of history; sequences of events in large part arise from chance, confusion, chaos, coincidence. But Watson and Todeschini rightly call their book the Medici *conspiracy* because the world in which Gi-

¹We discuss the 1995 and 2006 revisions of the Getty's acquisitions policy in Gill and Chippindale (forthcoming).

²Hoving 2004.

como Medici—bent antiquities dealer extraordinaire (as the book demonstrates)—flourished unites the famous auction houses, the celebrated and successful dealers, and the curators of great collections into a single coherent and crooked enterprise.

The central proposal of this landmark exposé is that there has been a grand conspiracy, an organized network, that has raided archaeological sites in Italy (the main focus of this study) and passed archaeological material to Switzerland, where it was processed so that it could be acquired by collectors and museums in the United States and across the world, a point that was previously made by Watson.³ Key to understanding how this network operated is a handwritten “organigram” (336), a chart showing the structure of who does what that was found in the apartment of Danilo Zicchi and links the antiquities dealer Robert E. Hecht, Jr., with two rival Italian looters, Gianfranco Becchina and Giacomo Medici (and their respective obtaining “teams”), as well as figures such as Nikolas Koutoulakis (“Goutoulakis”) and George Ortiz, whose famous collection of antiquities was honored in a grand exhibition at the Royal Academy in London and discussed by the present authors.⁴ The end of the organizing diagram leads us to Paris and to museums and collections in North America. In some ways, the revelations of *The Medici Conspiracy* just confirm, reflect, and elaborate what has already been the subject of long-standing concerns. But what the book brings into sharp focus is the scale, audacity, deceit, and complexity of what has been happening.

Geraldine Norman, longtime salesroom correspondent for the London *Times* and known also for her interest in the London underworld, has advanced a sensible and realistic view.⁵ As long as these lovely objects are valued, there rightly will be a market for them. Working in that market will be some crooks and shady characters, just as there have always been and always will be crooked greengrocers who deal in rotten apples. True. But it does not follow that honest and good citizens have to join the wickedness; they can distance themselves and buy good apples elsewhere. What Watson and Todeschini have proved now to exist is not a barrel with a few rotten apples mixed up with good fruit but a criminal business that is corrupt through and through. And the great U.S. museums that have allowed themselves to be sucked into this world are not—let us remember—the private ventures of spivs and con men but public institutions founded to fulfill ethical ideals and given special and generous financial privileges by our society in recognition of their cultural and public merit.⁶

We have space here to discuss the story in just one of the book’s many chapters, that entitled “The Puzzle of the ‘Orphans.’” A feature of the Getty’s pattern of acquisitions has been its acquiring fragments of Greek vases, fragments that are later fitted miraculously together to make a whole vase. Dietrich von Bothmer—famed curator at the Metropolitan, who, aged nearly 90, is still in post as Distinguished Research Curator—gave to the Getty no fewer than 119 vase frag-

ments between 1981 and 1993 (222). In the 10-year period (1984–1993) that was examined by Italian criminal investigators, the Getty acquired 1,061 vase fragments altogether (223), more than 10% from von Bothmer. Eight at least of what are now whole vases at the Getty arrived in pieces bit by bit over the years. Watson and Todeschini show there was always one primary source, but the bits were routed through several “subsidiary sources,” which “perhaps allowed the fiction, for the benefit of naive trustees of a museum, that these fragments were excavated separately, turned up at different moments in time, and came on to the market by different routes” (227).

The circumstantial evidence is strong that vases have been “broken deliberately” (229). Marketing teams of successful companies routinely are allocated a portion of their production to give away as freebies, flattering the influential, the opinion formers, those they would like to be friends in the future; similarly, the marketing teams in antiquities give freebies to friends or make them available at reduced price.⁷ The broken fragments—“orphans,” as the investigator Maurizio Pellegrini of the Italian public prosecutor’s office poignantly calls them—were made so by a violence of considered destruction. To do this to ancient objects, which through the good fortune of time and chance have reached us intact, is monstrous. Those employed in what should be the ethical worlds of public and charitable museums who have been playing these games have no respectable place there. Von Bothmer himself says in a February 2006 interview that he helped save works by collecting their fragments: “If the Italians don’t look after their own things, I’d rather have it in New York than kept somewhere where it’s not appreciated. I bought fragments for so long because dealers didn’t pay attention to them, and I didn’t find enormous prices, and it was a way of making sure they didn’t throw them out.”⁸ But Judge Guglielmo Muntoni’s written conviction of Medici in December 2004 “paints a different picture,” in which “von Bothmer was central to a social and financial web involving the buying, donation and authentication of loot that involved the Met, dealers, curators at the Getty Museum and private collectors.” Muntoni ruled: “The Metropolitan Museum gave Medici and his band their beginnings in the American traffic through Dietrich von Bothmer.”⁹

No more than 30 minutes’ search in our research notes and checks against the Beazley Archive database revealed many facts consistent with the patterns *The Medici Conspiracy* so tellingly states:

1. An Athenian black-figure neck amphora (Beazley 44099) surfaced with Koutoulakis in Geneva and then appeared in the stock of the Jerome M. Eisenberg’s Royal-Athena Galleries in New York.¹⁰
2. An Athenian black-figure hydria (Beazley 31596) attributed to the Antimenes painter surfaced on the London market with Robin Symes (antiquities dealer on the grand scale, recently imprisoned in England); it was loaned to the Getty (L.87.AE.4) in January 1987

³Watson 1997.

⁴Chippindale and Gill 2000.

⁵Norman 1995.

⁶Gill and Chippindale 2006; (forthcoming).

⁷Gill and Chippindale (forthcoming).

⁸Silver 2006.

⁹Silver 2006.

¹⁰Advertised in *Minerva* (Jan./Feb. 1995); see also Eisenberg 2001, no. 174.

by Atlantis Antiquities, and returned in February 1996 before being sold (complete with paper trail) at Sotheby's New York on 17 December 1996 (lot 49).

3. An Athenian black-figure amphora (Type B) (Beazley 46975), attributed to the painter of Berlin 1686 and now in the Getty (96.AE.92), had been reassembled by Fritz Bürki in 1988 and surfaced in the galleries of Atlantis Antiquities in that year and featured in an exhibition in New York, *Greek and Etruscan Art of the Archaic Period*, before being transferred to the Fleischman collection.¹¹ It is now on the list of antiquities to be returned to the Italian government.¹²
4. The Athenian red-figure cup (Beazley 30012) attributed to Makron by Robert Guy surfaced in 1989 in the Galerie Nefer in Zurich (owned by Frida Tchacos-Nussberger, whose name appears in the organigram)¹³ before moving to the Zimmermann collection in Bremen.

The list goes on and on.

Watson and Todeschini, themselves startled by the scale and extent of the wickedness they have revealed, have arrived at a rule of thumb; starting as a wry comment or despairing joke, it has now become a proven working principle: "However bad you feared it would be [so far as antiquities looting and smuggling are concerned], it always turns out worse" (310). They call this "Chippindale's Law," since they remember the first time it was voiced was in conversation with one of the present writers. The evidence now coming into the public domain has been taken in the documentation for public trials, especially in Britain and Italy. There are more trials to come, so we can expect this mess indeed to get worse.

The Medici Conspiracy also reports activities of North American collectors such as Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman, and Shelby White and Leon Levy, whose private collections have been explored elsewhere.¹⁴ Many of their pieces appear in Polaroid photographs that were seized during the September 1995 raid on the Geneva Freeport, which first began to reveal the conspiracy; those records strongly suggest the pieces had passed through Medici's hands (349–54).¹⁵ Indications that the pieces in these two collections derived from a common source is well made by the fragments of Roman wall paintings that have been observed to have come from the same room (119, 349–54). Both these partnerships may eventually be remembered not as great collectors but as great receivers of stolen cultural artifacts. In 1995, von Bothmer wrote of the "noble quest" of "true collectors" to form collections of Greek pottery.¹⁶ What nobility is there, now that we know what actually happened?

So the time has come for those in the museums who know about these things to come clean. Please, will von Bothmer, freshly lauded with an honorary doctor of letters degree from Emory University,¹⁷ now tell the Metropolitan's trustees just what he has been up to all his years (1946 to the present)

at the museum? And will successive antiquities curators at the Getty, who have for various reasons left, tell their trustees? And will those museum trustees, who hold that title of "trustee" because public trust has been given to them, tell all of us the truth about this whole business? It is reported that Fleischman has resigned as a trustee of the Getty (328). Will the real reason be given?

When did this corruption start? To our knowledge, at least one curator in a respected university museum knew in the early 1960s that Hecht was supplying pots from newly looted tombs in Italy, and yet the curator was happy to recommend the purchase.¹⁸ If the system was corrupt in the 1960s, should we continue to use 1973 as the cut-off point, as—following the Archaeological Institute of America's pioneering example of many years ago now—has become a standard practice, so that anything that surfaced before 1973 is treated as fair game?

Museums that have acquired material that has emerged on the market without findspot or apparent history could usefully learn from the collecting history of the Athenian red-figure cup signed by Euphronios as potter and attributed to Onesimos by Dyfri Williams of the British Museum.¹⁹ Fragments of the cup were acquired by the Getty from 1983 to 1985. In 1998, one of us commented, "We may not know from which Etruscan site these sherds were collected, or even the name of the *tombarolo*,"²⁰ but now we are presented with an answer, for the Etruscan graffito scratched on the foot of the cup has been shown to refer to Erclé,²¹ whose cult building was excavated at Cerveteri in 1993.²² As for the *tombarolo*, Polaroids of the fragments were found in Medici's warehouse in the Geneva Freeport including one of a piece known to Williams in November 1990 but not acquired by the Getty. The *tondo* passed through Galerie Nefer, acquired, it is alleged, by Tchacos-Nussberger from Nino Savoca of Munich (whose house in Munich was raided in 1994 [6–10]). Some of the fragments were said to be from the S. Schweitzer collection of Arlesheim, "an old and mysterious Swiss collection often used to provide a false provenance for objects" (95). Other pieces were acquired from the Hydra Gallery, closely linked with Medici (73); these fragments were said to come from the "Zbinden Collection," an apparent front for Christian Boursaud of the Hydra Gallery. Further fragments in the possession of Medici have been "surrendered," and the cup itself has been returned to Italy and is now displayed in the Villa Giulia Museum (inv. no. 121110, Beazley 13363).

This book's focus is on the looting of Italy because it is in Italy that the discoveries of its energetic and principled criminal investigators have become available. The spotlight occasionally flashes to other areas, such as the public display of apparently looted antiquities from Gandhara; when it does, it shows that just the same corrupt game is being played with other precious cultural materials. Framing the volume is the name of Oscar Muscarella, whose courageous

¹¹ Hamma 1994, no. 34.

¹² Gill and Chippindale (forthcoming).

¹³ Galerie Nefer 1989, no. 15.

¹⁴ Chippindale and Gill 2000.

¹⁵ See also Gill and Chippindale (forthcoming).

¹⁶ Shapiro et al. 1995, 13.

¹⁷ Emory University News Release, 6 March 2006, [http://](http://news.emory.edu/Releases/edelman1141653895.html)

news.emory.edu/Releases/edelman1141653895.html (2 February 2007).

¹⁸ Gill and Chippindale 2006.

¹⁹ Williams 1991.

²⁰ Gill 1998.

²¹ Heurgon 1989.

²² Gill and Chippindale 2006, 312, 316.

and often lonely voice has shed much light on dodgy and faked antiquities.

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