REVIEW ARTICLE

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

DAVID GILL AND CHRISTOPHER CHIPPINDALE


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 the 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.³

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 while avoiding any admission of criminality or guilt. Italian full-time professional tomb robbers publish their memoirs while avoiding any admission of criminality or guilt. Italian full-time professional tomb robbers publish their memoirs while avoiding any admission of criminality or guilt. Italian full-time professional tomb robbers publish their memoirs while avoiding any admission of criminality or guilt.

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 knife 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, coincidences. But Watson and Todeschini rightly call their book the Medici conspiracy because the world in which Gia-

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

³Hoving 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. 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 (“Gouttulakis”) 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. 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 links the antiquities dealer Robert E. Hecht, Jr., with the buying, donation and authentication of loot that involved Dietrich von Bothmer was central to a social and financial web involving the Medici and his band their beginnings in the American traffic through Dietrich von Bothmer.8 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.9

2. An Athenian black-figure hydria (Beazley 31506) attributed to the Antineme 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.


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 1868 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. It is now on the list of antiquities to be returned to the Italian government.

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) 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 of Greek pottery. What nobility is there, now that we know of the “noble quest” of “true collectors” to form collections of stolen cultural artifacts. In 1995, von Bothmer wrote:

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

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

18 Gill and Chippindale 2006.
22 Gill and Chippindale 2006, 312, 316.
D. GILL AND C. CHIPPINDALE, THE ILICIT ANTIQUITIES SCANDAL

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

CENTRE FOR EGYPTOLOGY AND MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITY OF WALES SWANSEA
SINGLETON PARK
SWANSEA SA2 8PP
UNITED KINGDOM
D.W.J.GILL@SWANSEA.AC.UK

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY
AND ANTHROPOLOGY
DOWNING STREET
CAMBRIDGE CB2 3DZ
UNITED KINGDOM
CC43@CAM.AC.UK

Works Cited


