

Through the Looking Glass

by Wayne G. Sayles

Collecting = Looting?

In the August 2nd edition of the *New York Times*, a piece by Martin Gottlieb and Barry Meier examined the question of ethics in the antiquities trade and of scholarly institutions that have dealings with the trade. Specifically, the article was critical of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City for placing unprovenanced items on display—but it was really just another tired rendition of the same story that we have heard for the past 20 years from the hierarchy of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA).

If the AIA had its way, no museum would accession artifacts from any source other than a formal archaeological dig. They condemn the trade in antiquities (including coins) and characterize private owners of ancient artifacts as being in a league with the devil. Lord Colin Renfrew, an archaeologist at Cambridge University, is quoted in the article as saying "Collectors who buy unprovenanced pieces form themselves as part of the looting process." AIA leadership warns professional archaeologists not to have anything to do with collectors, dealers or objects that are not from AIA recognized digs. Those who fail to heed these warnings are subject to excommunication.

The party line of the AIA is that removing an artifact from its archaeological context renders it valueless and destroys the cultural heritage of the place from which it was removed. Of course, in their eyes, the only group that can legitimately discover, analyze, interpret and report new information are professional archaeologists and associates from other academic disciplines that have been blessed with the holy water of the AIA. Gottlieb and Meier quoted AIA president Jane C. Waldbaum's position: "If a reputable scholar publishes an article about an artifact, they're giving it the imprimatur of authenticity based on their scholarship and expertise." In other words, any academic study of "unprovenanced"

artifacts aids and abets the enemy [collectors and the antiquities trade]. This arrogant assertion that academia holds the "imprimatur" and the power to grant or withhold access to mysteries of the past is pure rubbish. No one gave the AIA, archaeologists, or the academic community any such authority or control. Neither do they have any monopoly on talent, experience or education.

Every profession understandably does what it can to enhance its own prestige and to strengthen job security for its members, but the attitude of the AIA goes far beyond that sort of protectionism. The anti-collector stance of the AIA, especially under its current leadership, is burning bridges that took decades to build.

It is a shame that the AIA has taken such a belligerent stand against private collecting. Many of the world's foremost public collections have been enriched by donations from private collectors. The AIA's response is to chastise those museums who accept unprovenanced gifts from collectors. Of course in the eyes of the AIA, the only legitimate provenance is an archaeological excavation.

Although the AIA is loathe to admit it, the contributions of nonprofessional scholars to man's knowledge of the past form a very long list. If numismatic literature were limited to references and monographs produced only by archaeologists, it can safely be said that the corpus of literature would be brief and not very inspiring.

Academics are usually the first to admit that getting anything published in an institutional environment is a painful process. Only a small percentage of the artifacts taken from the earth in an archaeological dig ever get published. Most of them end up

in numbered and sealed crates in some dusty repository where they languish and often disintegrate for the lack of funds and time to even unpack them. In some countries, local museum curators are regular suppliers to the "looters" so frequently castigated by the AIA. On the other hand, private collectors have contributed to the dissemination of knowledge in every form of media—especially on the internet, where private sites with useful information about ancient coins greatly outnumber public ones.

While the AIA rails against collectors for being desirous to own even the most common of ancient pottery, or coins that were mass produced, the wheels of human progress cause massive destruction to ancient sites each year. The building of dams, commercial harbors, subway lines and other large construction projects has destroyed many more artifacts each year than could ever hope to be uncovered by archaeologists or so-called "looters." Fortunately, private collectors have saved many important artifacts from this kind of destruction by dispersing and protecting them.

Through its powerful lobby in Washington, the AIA has actively campaigned for the passage of laws and regulations that work to the detriment of collectors. Most recently, they have used the fiasco in Baghdad to sway opinion against the antiquities trade—ignoring the fact that museum employees were largely responsible for looting their own facility.

There are many individual members of the AIA who are themselves collectors, although quietly so. Many more members are sympathetic to or at least accepting of private collecting. Hopefully, one day the leadership of that organization will discover the utility of working with collectors for the common good.



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