Thinking About Collecting Histories: A Response to Marlowe

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The looting of archaeological sites to provide material to be acquired by museums or collected by private individuals has both material and intellectual consequences. Archaeological contexts and assemblages are lost and destroyed and go mostly unrecorded. Contextual information that would allow objects to be dated, or perhaps regional styles to be identified are lost. Our research, arising from concerns about this destruction in the late 1980s, has attempted to raise awareness of the impact of collecting on both the archaeological record and the interpretation of ancient material culture.[1] The loss of such knowledge is not something bewailed by all archaeologists: Sir John Boardman, for example, has claimed that a careful study of an Athenian pot without find-spot or context can lead to the uncovering of its inherent information.[2] And Philippe de Montebello held a similar position in his Berlin lecture when he touched upon the return of the Sarpedon krater.[3] But we would disagree with their optimism.

We feel uncomfortable with the word 'provenance' and have suggested that its use be discontinued for dealing with archaeological material.[4] Instead we have suggested the adoption of the terms 'collecting histories' and 'archaeology'. Archaeology identifies the deposition of an object in the ground or on a monument. The collecting history maps the trail of the object once it has left the archaeological deposit and then passes through the hands of individuals or enters public collections. Indeed it is this documented and authenticated collecting history that will ensure that the owner, seller or potential buyer on the market will avoid those scandals that have now shadowed classical collecting since the mid-1990s. This tracking of the history of the object through its previous owners is an approach that museums should use as a norm for conducting due diligence searches on potential acquisitions. Even so, it is possible to overlook or to be unaware of significant elements of such histories, such as the role of Robin Symes in the handling of the archaic bronze griffin now in Cambridge.[5]

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[1] E.g. Butcher and Gill, "Mischievous Pastime or Historical Science?"; Gill and Chippindale, "Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic Figures"; Chippindale and Gill, "Material Consequences of Contemporary Classical Collecting"; Chippindale and Gill, "On-line Auctions"; Chippindale, et al. "Collecting the Classical World"; Gill and Chippindale, "The Trade in Looted Antiquities and the Return of Cultural Propety".

[2] Boardman, "Archaeologists, Collectors, and Museums".

[3] de Montebello, "Whose Culture is it?".

[4] Gill, "Collecting Histories and the Market for Classical Antiquities".

[5] Gill, "Recent Acquisitions by the Fitzwilliam Museum", 290-91, no. 4, pl. VII, b.

Our starting point for research on the impact of looting was a study of third millennium BC marble figures from the Cyclades in the Aegean.[6] The careful analysis of the collecting histories and find-spots suggested that a large part of the scientific information about these figures had been lost since they became 'collectibles' from the 1960s onwards. The numerous fragmentary figures from the so-called 'Keros Haul' (often mistakenly described as a 'hoard') adds further confusion, although recent excavations at Kavos have helped to provide some contextual information.[7] One key issue that emerged from the study was that sets of figures attributed to the hand of a 'master' or 'sculptor', but where no single figure came from an archaeological context, raised the possibility that these figures were modern creations: and this indeed has been confirmed by subsequent studies.[8]

One New York based dealer suggested that the study of Cycladic figures was atypical of ancient material.[9] Our response was to look at a series of public exhibitions of classical objects in private collections in both Europe and North America.[10] The analysis suggested that as little as 25 per cent came from any sort of recorded or indicated archaeological context, and 76 per cent had no recorded collecting history before 1973 (the date of the Archaeological Institute of America's declaration over illicit antiquities that brought to public attention the concerns raised by the 1970 UNESCO Convention). A comparative study of material offered at auction in 1997 showed that 89 per cent of the lots had no recorded collecting histories before 1973.[11] Our study drew attention to the genuine concern about how the material represented by these collections had surfaced on the market. Our conclusions were confirmed by the subsequent revelations of the 'Medici conspiracy', the photographic dossier seized from the Geneva Freeport premises of Giacomo Medici in 1995.[12] These images, joined by the seizure of further photographic and documentary evidence from Gianfranco Becchina and Robin Symes, has led directly to the identification and return of

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[6] Gill and Chippindale, "Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic Figures".

[7] Sotirakopoulou, *The "Keros Hoard"*; Gill, Review of Sotirakopoulou, *The "Keros Hoard"*; Sotirakopoulou, "The Keros Hoard: Some Further Discussion"; Getz-Gentle, "The Keros Hoard Revisisted"; Renfrew, "The Keros Hoard: Remaining Questions"; Papamichelakis and Renfrew, "Hearsay About the "Keros Hoard"."

[8] Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*; Getz-Gentle, *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture*; Gill, Review of Getz-Gentle, *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture*; Gill, Review of Getz-Gentle, *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture,* Revised Edition.

[9] Eisenberg, "Ethics and the Antiquity Trade".

[10] Chippindale and Gill, "Material Consequences of Contemporary Classical Collecting"; Chippindale, et al. "Collecting the Classical World".

[11] Chippindale and Gill, "Material Consequences of Contemporary Classical Collecting", 482, Table 8.

[12] Watson, *Sotheby's, the Inside Story*; Watson and Todeschini, *The Medici Conspiracy*; Silver, *The Lost Chalice*. See also Gill, 'Sotheby's, Sleaze and Subterfuge"; Gill and Chippindale, "The Illicit Antiquities Scandal".

over 300 objects from North American public and private collections.[13] Two of the private collections that were analysed for the study, feature in the returns: the Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman collection (purchased or donated to the J. Paul Getty Museum), and the Shelby White and Leon Levy Collection.[14] Indeed the bronze krater that provided the cover image of the White-Levy bronze catalogue has been returned to Greece.[15] Marlowe mentions the 'Sicily: Art and Invention Between Greece and Rome' exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art.[16] She does not note that the exhibits included some of the returned material from Sicily such as the 'Aphrodite' (if the identification is appropriate), the Morgantina treasure, and the gold phiale.[17] Moreover the Getty's terracotta Hades was identified during the preparation for the exhibition and was handed over to the Italian authorities.[18]

Marlowe's emphasis has been on the use of 'studying, publishing and teaching antiquities that lack a secure archaeological findspot'.[19] This maps onto our concerns about intellectual consequences of collecting looted material. This was a major strand in the research on the Cycladic figures, though the study of the classical collections concentrated on material consequences. However the intellectual consequences of collecting classical antiquities have been expanded in subsequent studies. For example, the range of information that has been lost through the looting of the Sarpedon krater has been explored.[20] More significant is the study of the upper part of a funerary stele returned to Greece from the Shelby White collection.[21] The catalogue entry had used art historical and stylistic analysis to place the piece in western Anatolia. However the locating of the stele firmly in a rural cemetery in southern Attica (confirmed by the excavation of the bottom half) confirms the centrality of 'grounding' interpretative knowledge in archaeological contexts.

Marlowe has suggested approaches to strengthen our methodology not least in the way that published collecting histories cannot always be used to support information about find-spots. But her concerns that we were, perhaps, too generous in allowing some objects to appear in relatively secure find-spots may merely serve to show that the situation was even more alarming than the picture that we had painted. We would also want to adjust our benchmark date from 1973 to 1970 (the date of the UNESCO Convention). This is important as it is

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[13] Gill and Chippindale, "From Boston to Rome"; Gill and Chippindale, "From Malibu to Rome"; Gill, "Homecomings: Learning from the Return of Antiquities to Italy"; Gill, "The Returns to Italy from North America"; Gill, "Context Matters: Fragmented Pots"; Gill, "Context Matters: Princeton and Recently Surfaced Antiquities"; Gill, "Context Matters: Dallas Museum of Art Takes the Initiative".
[14] Exhibition catalogue, *A Passion for Antiquities*; Bothmer, *Glories of the Past*.
[15] Chi and Gaunt, *Greek Bronze Vessels*.
[16] Lyons, et al., *Sicily*.
[17] Lyons, et al., *Sicily*, 44-46, 56-57, 140-41. For the Aphrodite: Felch and Frammolino, *Chasing Aphrodite*.
[18] Lyons, et al., *Sicily*, 192, fig. 133.
[19] See also Marlowe, *Shaky Ground*.
[20] Gill, "The Material and Intellectual Consequences of Acquiring the Sarpedon Krater".
[21] Gill, "Looting Matters for Classical Antiquities".

clear from the North American returns to Italy that 1970 has indeed become the benchmark for such disputed material. We would also emphasise the authority behind statements concerning collecting histories. Take for example the marble statues of the Dioskouroi presently on loan to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. These are publicly stated as coming from the Mithraeum at Sidon in the Lebanon, information supplied by the dealers who had handled the group. However documentary evidence from the Becchina and Symes archives places the statues in Syria. Without this market evidence, the statues could have been used in an art historical discussion of the visual display of Roman Lebanon.

Our range of categories for archaeological information and collecting histories are more nuanced that Marlowe's two broad terms of 'grounded' and 'ungrounded'. Take for example the bronze head in the Shelby White collection that was reported to have been found in Suffolk, England.[22] This in fact appears to come from a series of classical bronzes from the small rural town of Icklingham.[23] Is this bronze and its companions part of the 'grounded' archaeology of Roman Suffolk, or the 'ungrounded' record of Roman provincial art?

Marlowe suggests that our approach will not change attitudes and bring about change. We would beg to differ. Take, for example, the Attic red-figured volute-krater attributed to the Methyse painter that had been acquired by the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA).[24] Did the exploration of the collecting history of the krater and its links with both Giacomo Medici ('a Swiss private collection') and Robin Symes ('an English private collection') in print, news media and social media help to place pressure on MIA's director Kaywin Feldman so that the krater was returned to Italy? We are also aware that one of the London auction-houses has become very sensitive to criticism that it has not taken its due diligence process seriously.[25] Yet there are university-based scholars who are keen to overlook the intellectual consequences of dealing with recently surfaced objects. This has become apparent with the Oxford University academic who has been working on the so-called 'Sappho papyrus'.

Are collectors more aware? Subsequent to the publication of our paper one of us had a relaxed face-to-face conversation with George Ortiz, one of the collectors discussed.[26] Ortiz was clearly aware of the issues and openly elaborated on the findpsots that had not been included in the catalogue. Marlowe cites the donation of the Walsh collection in the Fordham University Art Collection.[27] Marlowe mentions the full catalogue of the collection but overlooks the telling fact that the title of one of the objects, a Villanovan impasto hut, has had to be transferred to Italy as it featured in the Medici Dossier.[28] In addition

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[22] Mattusch, *The Fire of Hephaistos*.

[23] Reynolds, "The Icklingham Bronzes"; Browning, "A Layman's Attempts". For further discussion: Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*; Gill, Electronic Review of Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*

[24] Padgett, "An Attic Red-figure Volute-krater"; Gill, "Context Matters: The Unresolved Case of the Minneapolis Krater".

[25] Gill and Tsirogiannis, "Polaroids from the Medici Dossier".

[26] Ortiz, *In Pursuit of the Absolute*. See also Ortiz, "Overview and Assessment".

[27] Cavaliere and Udell, *Ancient Mediterranean Art*.

[28] Cavaliere and Udell, *Ancient Mediterranean Art*, 134-35, no. 37.

the collection contains a Roman imperial bronze from the sebasteion at Bubon in Turkey that may be linked to the figure in Houston.[29] There is no mention of the controversial series of inscribed (and dated) Late Antique mosaics from Apamea that the museum has acquired. Fordham appears to be deliberately overlooking the concerns of responsible and professional museum curators and archaeologists.[30]

Are museums more aware? A study of South Italian pottery acquired by Boston in the period after the US signed up to the 1970 UNESCO Convention shows that recently surfaced material continued to be added to the collection.[31] The North American museum community has been catching up with UK museum ethics through the AAMD's adoption of slightly more rigorous acquisition policies for classical objects.[32] The launch of the AAMD Object Registry is a nod towards more transparency, and it has led directly to the identification of fragments in the Dietrich von Bothmer collection to an Attic red-figured cup in Rome's Villa Giulia.[33] But the Cleveland Museum of Art has made a blistering defence in the acquisition and publication of the 'Leutwitz Apollo' that has what can only be described as having an 'ungrounded' collecting history that places it in a private collection in Saxony.[34] The extended legal case surrounding the Ka-Nefer-Nefer Egyptian mummy mask acquired by the St Louis Art Museum has demonstrated the problems surrounding court action and the importance of testing the authenticity of the documentary evidence.[35]

Marlowe raises an important point. Her 'ungrounded' archaeological material can serve to corrupt the research, interpretation and teaching of the classical world. But this merely serves to support our existing position that recently surfaced antiquities, stripped of their archaeological contexts, can have 'intellectual consequences' when they enter the corpus of knowledge.

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[29] Cavaliere and Udell, *Ancient Mediterranean Art*, 264-67, no. 80.
[30] Peppard, "Mosaics from a Church in the Diocese of Apamea".
[31] Gill and Chippindale, "South Italian Pottery in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston".
[32] Gill, "Context Matters: Museums and the Looted World".
[33] Tsirogiannis and Gill, "A Fracture in Time".
[34] Bennett, *Praxiteles: The Cleveland Apollo*; Gill, "Context Matters: The Cleveland Apollo Goes Public".
[35] Gill, "The Case of the Ka Nefer Nefer Mummy Mask".

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