

Context Matters: Reflections on the Várez Fisa Collection in Madrid

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The formation of modern collections raises several issues about the sources for objects. Are they derived from old, and documented, collections? Or have they surfaced in recent years? Can those museums be sure that they have not acquired material that has been removed from archaeological contexts by illicit means? How do you conduct appropriate due diligence prior to acquisition?

The significant number of returns from North American public and private collections has been a reminder of the scale of the problem (Gill 2018). However there have been fewer returns from European collections though the Ny Carlsberg in Copenhagen has been a significant one with material including Etruscan architectural terracottas (Gill 2016). Other clusters of potentially suspect material has been identified in a number of European collections (see also Gill 2019a).

One European collection that has faced scrutiny, though has yet to return any material to Italy, is the Museo Arqueológico Nacional de España in Madrid (Shaya 2017). In particular, it houses the Várez Fisa collection that was purchased for 12 m Euros in 1999 (Cabrera Bonet 2003; García 2014). José Luis Várez Fisa was a businessman and collector (García 2014). The collection contains a significant amount of South Italian pottery, a category of material that has drawn particular concern about the scale of looting (Elia 2001). The antiquities collection formed part of a loan exhibition to the Meadows Museum of Fine Art (Warden 2004; see also Padgett 2005).

Objects from Old Collections

The Várez Fisa collection was largely derived from material acquired from recently appeared material, though some of the items are known before the implementation of the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. These 'older' items include at least nine pieces, including one going back to an 18th century collection:

- a. a black-figured amphora attributed to the Affecter that had formed part of the Hearst collection in California (inv. 1999.99.54: Beazley 1956, 242, 33; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 166–68, no. 54; BAPD 301321),
- b. a white ground lekythos attributed to the workshop of the Bowdoin painter and once part of the Embirikos collection in London (inv. 1999.99.78: Münzen und Medaillen A.G., Basel, *Kunstwerke der Antike* 40, 13 December 1969, lot 82; Cabrera Bonet 2003, no. 235–36, no. 80; BAPD 1434),
- c. an Attic red-figured column-krater attributed to the Triptolemos painter (inv. 1999.99.89: Beazley 1925, 153, 13; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 266–67, no. 91; BAPD 203804),
- d. an Attic red-figured column-krater (inv. 1999.99.94: Sotheby's London 12 June 1967, lot 150; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 268–70, no. 92; BAPD 13795),
- e. an Attic red-figured neck amphora attributed to the Pig painter that formed part of the Charles Eyre (1806–86) collection at Welford Park, Berkshire (inv. 1999.99.86; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 274–76, no. 94; BAPD 29221),
- f. an Attic red-figured column-krater attributed to the Pig painter (inv. 1999.99.90: Beazley 1963, 563, 14bis; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 277–78, no. 95; BAPD 206442),

- g. an Attic red-figured stamnos attributed to the Pan painter (inv. 1999.99.102: Beazley 1925, 101, 15; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 282–85, no. 97; BAPD 206298),
- h. an Attic red-figured lekythos attributed to the Pan painter (inv. 1999.99.111: Beazley 1963, 557, 119bis; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 292–94, no. 101; BAPD 206363), and
- i. an Attic red-figured pelike attributed to the Meleager painter that had resided in a Spanish private collection (inv. 1999.99.107: Beazley 1963, 1411, 42; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 341–43, no. 121; BAPD 217960).

The fact that the extended history of some items in the collection can be presented in the official catalogue suggests that the absence of history in the rest of the collection is likely to be significant.

Objects that Surfaced after 1970

The majority of material where the history of acquisition is noted suggests that the items were added to the collection after 1970. It has been noted:

The Várez Fisa collection, compiled from the 1970s and 1980s on the antiquities market, consisted of 188 Egyptian, Iberian, Greek, Etruscan and Roman pieces (Cabrera 2004, 69).

In fact, at least 30 items (approximately 15 per cent) were added to the collection in the 1990s. Why is there a reluctance to acknowledge publicly that acquisitions were made in that decade? Is it because there was a growing awareness of the nature of the antiquities market?

The acquisition of a collection suggests that the pieces had resided together and been cherished by the owner over several years. Yet it is clear that some were purchased immediately prior to the sale to Madrid. At least two pieces were acquired in 1999, the year of the acquisition by Madrid: one amphora, once in the Hearst collection, was purchased from Royal Athena Galleries (inv. 1999.99.54: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 166–68, no. 54), and an Attic red-figured bell-krater attributed to the Christie painter that was sold at Sotheby's (New York) on 13 June 1999 (lot 64) (inv. 1999.99.100: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 310–11, no. 109). At least six items were acquired for the collection in 1998, and eleven in 1997 (Table 1). Thus at least 10 per cent of the collection was acquired by Várez Fisa in the three years prior to the acquisition by Madrid.

This phenomenon of adding to a collection just prior to its sale or gift to a museum has been identified for the private collections of Gilbert Denman, and Barbara and Laurence Fleishman (Shapiro, Picón, and Scott 1995; True and Hamma 1994; see also Chippindale and Gill 2000). One fifth of the Denman collection, 28 pieces, was added in the two years prior to its acquisition by the San Antonio Museum of Art, and 8 items from the Fleischman collection before its acquisition by the J. Paul Getty Museum.

1997

- 60: inv. 1999.99.55. Attic bf amphora, compared to the Antimenes painter. BAPD 20425. Royal Athena 1997. Sale: Eisenberg 1997, no. 88.
- 69: inv. 1999.99.66. Attic bf hydria, compared to the Antimenes painter. BAPD 20427. Royal Athena 1997. Sale: Eisenberg 1997, no. 93.
- 94: inv. 1999.99.86. Attic black-figured neck amphora attributed to the Pig painter. BAPD 29221. Christie's 25 November 1997, lot 229.
- 95: inv. 1999.99.90. Attic red-figured column-krater, attributed to the Pig painter. BAPD 206442. Charles Ede (1997), no. 13.
- 96: inv. 1999.99.105. Attic rf kalpis, attributed to the Pig painter. BAPD 44096. Royal Athena 1997. Sale: Eisenberg 1997, no. 101.
- 112: inv. 1999.99.114. Attic white ground lekythos. Christie's (New York) 30 May 1997, lot 109.
- 113: inv. 1999.99.83. Attic rf stemless cup. BAPD 44388. New York, market, Robert E. Hecht, Jr.; Royal Athena (1997). Sale: Eisenberg 1997, no. 107.
- 117: inv. 1999.99.116. Attic red-figured stemmed pyxis, attributed to the Shuivalov painter. Christie's (New York) 30 May 1997, lot 112.
- 118: inv. 1999.99.115. Attic red-figured pyxis attributed to the manner of the Meidias painter. Christie's (New York) 30 May 1997, lot 113.
- 119: inv. 1999.99.118. Attic red-figured amphoriskos attributed to the circle of the Shuivalov painter. Christie's (New York) 30 May 1997, lot 111.
- 120: inv. 1999.99.119. Attic red-figured chous. Christie's (New York) 30 May 1997, lot 109.

1998

- 43: inv. 1999.99.63. Black-figured neck amphora, attributed to the Hyblaea class. Christie's (London) 8 April 1998, lot 202 (£23,000)
- 44: inv. 1999.99.43. Boeotian terracotta horse and rider. Christie's (New York) 5 June 1998, lot 114 (\$4,600).
- 75: inv. 1999.99.74. Attic black-figured olpe attributed to the circle of the Andocides painter. Christie's (New York) 5 June 1998, lot 124 (\$57,500).
- 89: inv. 1999.99.87. Attic red-figured Panathenaic shaped amphora. BAPD 29377. Royal Athena 1998.
- 100: inv. 1999.99.108. Attic red-figured lekythos. BAPD 18453. Christie's 8 April 1998, lot 206 (£12,650).
- 137: inv. 1999.99.142. Apulian pelike attributed to the painter of the Siren Citharist. Christie's (New York) 5 June 1998, lot 233 (\$16,100). Formerly Graham Geddes collection.

Table 1. Items acquired from the Fárez Visa collection in 1997 and 1998

Sources for the Collection

What were the sources for the collection? It is now recognised that the presence of objects derived from specific dealers and private collectors could be an indication of potential 'toxic' antiquities within a collection. For example, an Attic red-figured stemless cup was originally in the hands of Robert E. Hecht Jr. on the New York market (inv. 1999.99.83; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 319–21, no. 113; BAPD 44388). One of the Attic red-figured cups attributed to the Euergides painter surfaced with Galerie Nefer in Zurich in 1992 (inv. 1999.99.84; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 248–49, no. 85; BAPD 41408), and was purchased from Christie's New York on 30 May 1997 (lot 108). The Galerie Nefer has been associated with a number of pieces that have had to be returned to Italy (Gill 2020a). Two items, an Attic black-figured amphora attributed to the Priam painter (inv. 1999.99.53; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 173–76, no. 57; BAPD 20449) and a Laconian cup attributed to the Hunt painter (inv. 1999.99.45; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 145–46, no. 46; Warden 2004, 89–90, no. 11), have been identified from the Schinousa archive showing that they had passed through the hands of Robin Symes (see also Tsirogiannis 2016). The amphora is reported to have resided in a private New York collection before it was placed at auction at Sotheby's on 17 December 1997 (lot 96); not only did the amphora feature in the Schinousa archive, but also in the Medici dossier suggesting a link between the two dealers.

Concerns about the origins of material in the collection have been raised on several occasions (Isman 2010; Shaya 2018; Pellegrini 2020). Specifically, some 22 items in the Várez Fisa collection have been identified from the Medici and Becchina dossiers (Gill 2010). An orientalizing amphora surfaced through Palladion Antike Kunst (inv. 1999.99.159; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 118–19, no. 35), and has been recognized from the seized Becchina archive. Palladion Antike Kunst has been recognised as the source of several returned antiquities.

One of the most toxic associations is with material that surfaced through Sotheby's in London specifically in the 1980s and 1990s. The documentation shows the regular consignment of antiquities to these sales from Giacomo Medici and his associates based in Switzerland (Watson 1997; see also Gill 1997). The seizure of polaroids in the Geneva freeport led to the return of hundreds of antiquities to Italy (Watson and Todeschini 2007). At least 19 pieces from the Várez Fisa collection passed through Sotheby's in London from 1982 to 1996, and this route is often recognised as the first sighting of the object.

1982, 13–14 December
Lot 223: no. 108.
Lot 255: no. 53.
1984, 10–11 December
Lot 364: no. 129.
1985, 22 May
Lot 328: no. 63.
1986, 8 December
Lot 328: no. 105.
1988, 11 July
Lot 91: no. 104.
Lot 108: no. 77.
1988, 12 December
Lot 110: no. 121. [Known from old collection.]
Lot 128: no. 99.
Lot 138: no. 73
Lot 142: no. 72.
1989, 10 July
Lot 259: no. 139.
1989, 11 December
Lot 102: no. 138
1990, 14 December
Lot 296: no. 144.
1991, 3 December
Lot 165: no. 102.
Lot 199: no. 140.
1995, 14 December
Lot 140: no. 107
Lot 143: no. 56
1996, 10 December
Lot 170: no. 52

Table 2. Objects in the Várez Fisa collection that surfaced at Sotheby's in London during the 1980s and 1990s.

At least eight of these pieces that passed through Sotheby's in London in the 1980s and 1990s have been identified from the Medici photographic archive, some showing the objects in fragments or still covered in earth suggesting that they had recently been removed from the ground (see Isman 2010; Pellegrini 2020). Does this suggest that Medici was the source for these objects that were then consigned to Sotheby's in London? The Attic column-krater that surfaced in December 1986, was in same sale as two Apulian pots from the Geddes collection that were withdrawn from the auction at Bonhams in 2008 (see Gill 2009); a marble statue of an athlete, also later offered by Bonhams, appeared in the same sale. The Attic black-figured amphora that surfaced at Sotheby's in May 1989, was in the same sale as a Campanian bell-krater from the Geddes collection that was withdrawn from the auction at Bonhams. The Gnathian krater that appeared in the December 1990, appears in the same photograph in the 'workshop' of Fritz Bürki as an Apulian pyxis attributed to the Baltimore painter that was offered for sale by the Royal Athena Galleries in in 2010. The nature of these sales suggests that Madrid needs to open discussions with the Italian authorities.

- 56: Attic bf amphora. Inv. 1999.99.51; Sotheby's 14 December 1995, lot 143; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 171–72, no. 56. Medici dossier.
- 63: Attic bf amphora. Inv. 1999/99/59; Sotheby's 22 May 1989, lot 328; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 190–92, no. 63; BAPD 44365. Medici dossier. The polaroid in the Medici dossier is dated to 14 November 1988.
- 99: Attic rf lekythos attributed to the manner of the Berlin painter. Inv. 1999.99.109; Sotheby's 12 December 1988, lot 128; Christie's New York 5 June 1998, lot 138; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 288–89, no. 99; Padgett 2017, 400, no. BNM12; BPAD 9024732. Medici dossier.
- 103: Attic rf column-krater. Inv. 1999.99.96; Sotheby's (London) 22 May 1989, lot 348; Christie's New York 10 July 1992, lot 340; Royal Athena Galleries January 1995, lot 109; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 297–98, no. 103; BAPD 43915. Medici dossier.
- 105: Attic rf column-krater. Inv. 1999.99.97; Sotheby's London 8 December 1986, lot 328; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 301–02, no. 105; BAPD 16664. Medici dossier.
- 123: Sicilian calyx-krater 1999.99.147; Sotheby's 10 December 1996, lot 187; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 346–47, no. 123. Medici dossier.
- 129: Apulian bell-krater. 1999.99.124; Sotheby's 10–11 December 1984, lot 364; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 361–64, no. 129. Medici dossier.
- 144: Gnathian krater. Inv. 1999.99.138; Sotheby's (London) 14 December 1990, lot 296; 8 December 1994, lot 154; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 406–07, no. 144. Photograph in the Medici dossier showing the krater being restored by Fritz Bürki.

Table 3. Objects in the Várez Fisa collection that surfaced at Sotheby's in London during the 1980s and 1990s and identified in the Medici Dossier.

The toxicity of antiquities that surfaced via Sotheby's in London has been demonstrated by the issues with material acquired by Graham Geddes in Melbourne. The Geddes collection attracted attention when ten lots had to be withdrawn from Bonham's in London when the collection was offered for sale (Gill 2009; Gill 2019b, 806; Gill 2021). At least four of the pieces in the Várez Fisa collection were derived from the Graham Geddes collection: two Attic black-figured amphorae, one attributed to the painter of Vatican 365 (inv. 1999.99.61: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 163–65, no. 53; BAPD 7462), and another attributed to the manner of the Acheloos painter (inv. 1999.99.56: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 188–89, no. 62; BAPD 351256). The first (no. 53) had surfaced at Sotheby's (London) 13–14 December 1982 (lot 255), and was resold by the same auction-house on 8 December 1986 (lot 327). The second (no. 62) had surfaced through N. Koutoulakis and was known by 1971 (Beazley 1971, 169, 9bis). A Paestan lebes attributed to Asteas surfaced at Sotheby's (London) in 21 May 1984 (lot 372) and had been sold at Christie's (New York) in December 1997 (inv. 1999.99.146: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 413–14, no.147). Koutoulakis has also been recognised as a source for recently surfaced antiquities (Gill 2019a). An Apulian pelike attributed to the Siren Citharist painter had surfaced at Sotheby's (London) in 9 December 1988 (lot 171) and had once formed part of the Graham Geddes collection; it had then been sold at Christie's (New York) 5 June 1998 (lot 233) (inv. 1999.99.142; Trendall and Cambitoglou 1991, 165, 334b1; Cabrera Bonet 2003, 384–86, no.137).

Six pieces surfaced through four sales at Sotheby's New York between 1996 and 1997. One of them, an Attic red-figured bell-krater attributed to the Christie painter, is known from images in the Medici dossier dated to 1995 (inv. 1999.99.100: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 310–11, no. 109; BAPD 20360). This raises concerns about who consigned the bell-krater to Sotheby's on 13 June 1996 (lot 64)? This issue relating to Sotheby's in New York has been raised by other pieces that surfaced in 1994 and 1995 and have subsequently had to be returned to Italy (Gill 2018). Who was the vendor for the pieces consigned to the three sales: 10 December 1996 (lots 112–113: inv. 1999.99.77, 76: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 230–34, nos. 78–79; BAPD 20420, 201418); 31 May 1997 (lot 77: inv. 1999.99.85: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 322–25, no. 114; BAPD 21845); and 17 December 1997 (lot 96: inv. 1999.99.53: Cabrera Bonet 2003, 173–76, no. 57; BAPD 20449)?

Some of the pieces from the Várez Fisa collection had passed through Christie's, either in London or in New York. These include three Apulian pieces that were acquired at Christie's (New York) in May 1997 (Cabrera Bonet 2003, nos. 136, 143, 146). Several items in the Várez Fisa collection appear to have been purchased from the Royal Athena Galleries in New York between 1985 and 1998. At least 10 antiquities that were sold by this source have been returned to Italy suggesting that the histories for the Várez Fisa pieces should be explored (Gill 2018).

1992, 10 July
 lot 340 (no. 103)
 1993, 28 April
 lot 8 (no. 80).
 1994, 10 June:
 lot 129 (no. 87).
 1995, 5 July:
 lot 174 (no. 59).
 1996 14 June, 1
 Lot 78 (no. 67); lot 82 (no.
 1996, 3 July:
 lot 58 (no. 64); lot 64 (no. 84); lot 42 (no. 71; inv. 1999.99.70).
 1997, 30 May (NY):
 lot 58 (no. 146), 115 (no. 143), 118 (no. 136).
 1997, 25 November 1997:
 lot 229 (no. 94).
 1997, 30 May 1997 (NY):
 lot 109 (no. 120), lot 111 (no. 119), lot 110 (no. 112), lot 113 (no. 118), lot 112 (no.
 117).
 1998, 8 April:
 lot 206 (no. 100).

Table 4. Objects in the Várez Fisa collection that surfaced at Christie's London and New York

1985

76: Attic bf olpe. Inv. 1999.99.75. BAPD 17011. Royal Athena 1985.

1995

70: Attic bf hydria. Inv. 1999.99.68. BAPD 44149. Royal Athena 1995.

80: Attic white ground Lekythos. Inv. 1999.99.78. BAPD 1434. Münzen und Medaillen 1969); Royal Athena (1995).

88: Attic Rf amphora. Inv. 1999.99.88. BAPD 44154. Germany, private collection; Sotheby's 7 July 1994, lot 343; Royal Athena (1995).

103: Attic rf column-krater. Inv. 1999.99.96. BAPD 43915. Royal Athena 1995.

1997

60: Attic bf Amphora. Inv. 1999.99.55. BAPD 20425. Royal Athena (1997).

69: Attic bf hydria. Inv. 1999.99.66. BAPD 20427. Royal Athena (1997).

96: Attic rf kalpis. Inv. 1999.99.105. BAPD 44096. Royal Athena (1997).

113: Attic rf stemless Cup. Inv. 1999.99.83. BAPD 44388. New York, market, Robert E. Hecht, Jr.; Royal Athena (1997).

1998

89: Attic rf amphora. Inv. 1999.99.87. BAPD 29377. Royal Athena (1998).

Table 5. Objects in the Várez Fisa collection that passed through the Royal Athena Galleries, New York.

Cat. no.	Madrid inv. no.	BAPD	First surfacing
35	1999.99.159		Palladion Antike Kunst
43	1999.99.63		Christie's 1998
44	1999.99.43		Christie's 1998
46	1999.99.45		[Schinousa archive]
47	1999.99.46		Sotheby's 1989
52	1999.99.52	29025	Sotheby's 1988
53	1999.99.61	7462	Sotheby's 1982
54	1999.99.54	301321	Royal Athena Galleries 1999
56	1999.99.51		Sotheby's 1995 [Medici dossier]
57	1999.99.53	20449	Sotheby's New York 1997 [Schinousa archive]
60	1999.99.55	20425	Royal Athena Galleries 1997
61	1999.99.60	9024714	[Medici dossier]
62	1999.99.56	351256	Koutoulakis by 1971
63	1999.99.59	44365	Sotheby's 1989 [Medici dossier]
68	1999.99.67	7324	Christie's 1980
69	1999.99.66	20427	Royal Athena Galleries 1997
70	1999.99.68	44149	Royal Athena Galleries 1995
72	1999.99.71		Sotheby's 1988
73	1999.99.72		Sotheby's 1988
75	1999.99.74		Sotheby's 1998
77	1999.99.79	41554	Sotheby's 1988
78	1999.99.77	20420	Sotheby's 1996
79	1999.99.76	20418	Sotheby's 1996
83	1999.99.153		Royal Athena Galleries 1995
85	1999.99.84	41408	Zurich, Galerie Nefer 1992
86	1999.99.82	7465	Münzen und Medaillen 1982
87	1999.99.81	20316	Christie's 1994
88	1999.99.88	44154	Sotheby's 1994
89	1999.99.87	29377	Royal Athena Galleries 1998
94	1999.99.86	29221	Christie's 1997
96	1999.99.105	44096	Royal Athena Galleries 1997
99	1999.99.109	9024732	Sotheby's 1988 [Medici dossier]
100	1999.99.108	18453	Christie's 1998
103	1999.99.96	43915	Sotheby's 1989 [Medici dossier]
105	1999.99.97	16664	Sotheby's 1986 [Medici dossier]
109	1999.99.100	20360	Sotheby's New York 1996 [Medici dossier]
112	1999.99.114	9022229	Christie's 1997
113	1999.99.83	44388	New York market, Robert E. Hecht Jr.
117	1999.99.116	9022231	Christie's 1997
118	1999.99.115	9022230	Christie's 1997
119	1999.99.118	9022228	Christie's 1997
120	1999.99.119	9022227	Christie's 1997
123	1999.99.147		Sotheby's 1996 [Medici dossier]
129	1999.99.124		Sotheby's 1984 [Medici dossier]
137	1999.99.142		Sotheby's 1988
138	1999.99.131		Sotheby's 1989
139	1999.99.132		Sotheby's 1989
140	1999.99.133		Sotheby's 1991

144	1999.99.138		Sotheby's 1990 [Medici dossier]
147	1999.99.146		Sotheby's 1984
149	1999.99.145		Münzen und Medaillen 1982

Table 6. Dates of recent first surfacing for objects in the VárezFisa collection.

Conclusion

It is now over twenty years since Madrid acquired the Várez Fisa collection, and more than ten years since it became clear that a number of objects had been handled by Giacomo Medici, Gianfanco Becchina, Robert Hecht, and Robin Symes (Isman 2010; Gill 2010). What progress has been made by the museum to resolve the dispute with the Italian authorities? Has the museum conducted an appropriate due diligence investigation? During the intervening period, material that surfaced on the antiquities market through exactly the same sales and documented in the same photographic archives have either been returned to Italy or withdrawn from sale. Why have the museum authorities in Madrid been so dilatory in their response to the reports? Are European museum professionals more reluctant than their north American counterparts to take appropriate action?

The Várez Fisa collection highlights, once again, the problems of private individuals forming collections from material that has surfaced on the market (see Chippindale and Gill 2000; Gill 2018). Collectors need to undertake a due diligence process to check the histories of the objects that they seek to acquire. They should seek to contact the authorities that hold the photographic archives seized in Switzerland and Greece to check that the proposed acquisitions were not featured (see Gill and Tsirogiannis 2016). Indicators such as previous owners or appearance in certain sales should flag up potential problems. Academics also need to go beyond identifying the sale origins of objects (e.g. Padgett 2005, 313), and seek to ask searching questions about how that material arrived at the sale room (see also Gill 2020b), and indeed how the items left the ground.

Once again, we see a body of material removed from its archaeological context, and therefore unable to add to the meaningful interpretation of such artefacts.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Christos Tsirogiannis for his discussion of this material, and for some of the identifications made in the seized photographic archives.

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