

Ancient Hands in Context: Art vs. Artifact and the Antiquities Market

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The illegal antiquities market is financing the destruction of the remains of pre-Columbian civilization. In the United States, this process has often been aided by museums, collectors, and scholars, who have unwittingly collaborated. Recently, initiatives toward reform have been taken by UNESCO, professional organizations, and two academic institutions.¹ With pre-Columbian artworks fetching record prices at auctions everywhere, unscrupulous dealers in the United States and Europe ignore legal constraints, while thieves threaten, terrorize or even kill anyone who stands in their way. United States Customs Service officials, concentrating on the drug trade, can do little to stem the flood of illicit antiquities into this country.²

Conflicts of Interest

It is clear that the conflict between the dealers, collectors and museums which support the antiquities market, and the archaeologists, source nations, and others who want to restrict such trade, is becoming more pronounced. Almost daily there are reports in the news about the provenience of a particular object in a museum collection, the destruction of archaeological sites by looting, notably in Iraq, or the legal battles of a dealer, collector or museum. Furthermore, the looting and sale of antiquities worldwide continues to grow even as the laws of both "source" and "purchase" countries intensify. Meanwhile, the general public is slowly beginning to consider the ethics of both private collecting and museum acquisitions.

Despite this financial connection, dealers and collectors often see themselves as the true stewards of antiquities. To them, the archaeologists are an elitist clique, who try to control access to archaeological materials for scientific study, but do not truly love these objects for their intrinsic human value and beauty, and are often not interested in their public display.³

The Cost of Destruction

Most of the statistics we do have about looted archaeological materials come from studies of artifacts that surface on the international antiquities market, and they indicate that the vast majority - up to 90 percent or more - of these "art" objects come from illicit

¹ **Archeology and the Art Market**, Science 21 January 1972: Vol. 175. no. 4019, pp. 263 – 266 by Clemency Coggins

² **Art for Whose Sake?: Trading in Antiquities; Rare Pre-Columbian Relics, at Any Cost** New York Times, July 31, 1995 by William H. Honen

³ Looting and the Antiquities Market, **Athena Review**, Vol.4, no. 3, Michele A. Miller

excavations. Interpol's statistics on looted and stolen antiquities put their market value at \$4 to \$5 billion a year, similar to the arms trade and second only to narcotics. Exports of antiquities from public lands in the United States were estimated as \$25 million a year over a decade ago, and looted Maya objects now bring well over \$120 million a year on the art market.⁴

It's a scenario repeated at scores of national parks and historic sites. Private owners are selling significant artifacts on the commercial market at prices well beyond the reach of the Park Service or parks' "friends" groups. Often, parks learn of an impending sale only when an auction house lists an item in its catalogue. A notice usually arrives just weeks or months before the auction occurs--too late for friends groups to even try to raise money for a successful bid. As a result, the item ends up in the hands of a private collector instead of under the care of a public steward.⁵

The Art of the Matter

Pre-Columbian art and artifacts exist in extraordinary variety and in great abundance in museums and private collections throughout Europe and the Americas. Many of these collections were begun in the nineteenth-century, before any serious archaeological investigation had been accomplished, and when large national museums were seeking to fill out their inventories of world pre-histories.

These pre-Columbian collections were often amassed by amateurs, tourists, and, occasionally collectors, who purchased attractive or unusual items from local and international dealers. They sought objects that appealed to their own taste and to their own concepts of fine workmanship and beauty, which determined the focus and nature of what they collected. Inevitably these objects lacked any reliable provenience data, since they were often purchased from dealers located outside of the country of origin or from sellers within the country who attempted to obscure the actual origins of individual objects. The scientific and technological advances of the twenty-first-century afford us an important opportunity to reexamine these nineteenth-century objects to verify their authenticity, and confirm that the materials and techniques employed in their creation are representative of pre-Columbian art and culture.⁶

Recreating History

Through the work of artisans in North America and Europe, the art of the ancient southeast Native American civilizations is being revived. Archaeologists turn with increasing frequency to these scholarly craftspeople with shards, photos of hieroglyphs,

⁴ **Ethical Issues in Archaeology**, Society for American Archaeology By Larry J. Zimmerman, Karen D. Vitelli, Julie Hollowell-Zimmer, AltiMira Press, 2003 pp. 48, 49

⁵ **History For Sale**: National Parks Magazine Nov 1, 2002 Phyllis McIntosh

⁶ What Is Real? A New Look at PreColumbian Mesoamerican Collections
ArthroNotes Vol. 26 No. 1 Spring 2005 Museum of Natural History, Jane MacLaren Walsh

and conceptual renderings, seeking the missing pieces of an ancient puzzle. Museums and galleries often fill the voids in painstakingly assembled, priceless collections with reproductions faithfully produced using authentic materials and techniques – items often indistinguishable from the original.

One such artisan, Ancient Hands artist Ivan Gundrum, helped reproduce history. Through his skills as an ethnographic artist, from reports and photographs of excavated artifacts, he created a collection of replicas that preserve the work of Weedon Island and Kolomoki Indians and offer us the chance to see things that otherwise might never be seen.

Many of the original artifacts were incomplete. However, drawing upon his tremendous reservoir of talent, technical knowledge and creativity, Gundrum was able to fill in the missing portions. His distinctive replicas of bowls, vases and effigies of the Florida Gulf Coast Indians are part of the permanent collection of the Tallahassee Junior Museum.

Gundrum's mastery of the techniques of his media, and his dedication to excellence, enabled him to produce objects that are aesthetically similar to the originals, reviving the tradition of the ancient artists.⁷

The value of the work of these artisans cannot be overstated, as museums, galleries, and public stewards of existing collections find it increasingly difficult to obtain artifacts of verifiable provenience, in a market fraught with illegal and fake "objects". Additionally, the interest in the preservation of the culture and arts of the early Southeast American Mound-Builders is on the rise, as collectors gain insight into the aesthetic and historic value of these objects as artistic items that preserve the culture of the earliest inhabitants of North America.

Revival: Recovering What Is Lost

The use of archaeological data and authentic materials and techniques in the creation of replicas to complete the picture are the basis for the revival of an artistic tradition, carried forward by the passing-on of these methods to others. What is known about the cultures of the Mound-Builders is continually evolving, as new discoveries shed light on common practices, the effects of trade, migration patterns, and practical and ceremonial uses for objects. While technology does enable us to establish artifact provenience, the methods used by the original artisans are known, and are clarified as our understanding of the culture grows. As artisans of Native American heritage begin to re-discover their roots, and find meaning in the traditions of their ancestors, the art of the Mound-Builders flourishes. Still others find the elements within the tradition applicable to their own efforts, producing interpretive and expressive works that relate that which was simple embellishment in ancient times, to the modern era in which we live. This connection of the new to the old is what Ancient Hands is all about – Reviving a Tradition.

⁷ Art From The Past, Tallahassee Magazine, Fall 1991, J. Martin Haythorn