



# Pillaging the Past

**How the Illicit  
Antiquities Trade  
Hurts Us All**





VASSIL-HYKINEDIA COMMONS

by **Cherkea Howery**

**L**ong before an archaeologist ever scrapes the earth's surface, she has spent countless hours researching and planning the excavation. She has carefully chosen the site and her team, and has even applied for funding to pay for the whole operation. Armed with a question to answer or a theory about what could be found, the team usually starts with non-invasive methods—such as a site survey or geophysical prospection, a mapping and imaging technique that reveals features beneath the surface—to choose the best place to dig.

After measuring the trench, the team methodically digs inch by inch, identifying changes in soil color and density until objects, walls, floors, or even skeletons are exposed in the sunlight. Along the way, the archaeologist meticulously records everything in an excavation journal and regularly photographs the area. Any objects removed from the ground are washed, photographed, and later repaired by a conservator, as needed. The process concludes with the publication of significant finds.

Elsewhere, a small team of looters sneaks onto private or public land where they think there might be buried treasures to find and sell. Frantically digging and scanning the ground for valuable objects, throwing dirt and discarding sherds (pottery fragments), these looters destroy scientifically valuable information. Later, they will sell their finds to unscrupulous dealers.

The differences between an illegal excavation and a scientific one are vast. While archaeologists look for clues about the lives of past people, looters look for ancient objects to sell for a profit. Both activities end with the destruction of the area being excavated, but if the process can be done scientifically, we have the opportunity to discover riches beyond the objects revealed in the dirt.

### Careers in the Dirt

I wanted to be an archaeologist since I was nine years old—influenced, like many professionals of my generation, by Indiana

Jones, *National Geographic*, and museum exhibitions.

To make that dream a reality, after earning a bachelor's degree in history, I traveled to

England to complete a master's degree in archaeology. I joined a team excavating at an industrial site of the Upper Forge in Coalbrookdale, England, where we uncovered several phases of occupation—and the first steel furnace in England. Next, I joined the Leontari Cave (Lion's Cave) excavation led by the University of Athens and the Greek Ministry of Culture on Mount Hymettos, where we uncovered Neolithic pottery and ritual figurines dedicated to the gods.

After further experiences in the backrooms of the Stoa of Attalos (the site museum at the ancient Agora in Athens), surveying sites in the Arizona desert, and excavating middens (old trash heaps containing the refuse of daily domestic life) and slave quarters in Bermuda, I spent a few years cleaning, cataloguing, and examining finds from such excavations. As I began to think more about how to take care of the objects we find, I developed a serious interest in museums.

Within the museum environment, I discovered my true passion in working with objects, researching their histories, and creating exhibitions to educate people. But what can we tell visitors when we do not know an object's history?

### Out of Context

Recently, I worked with an Egyptian cartonnage, a funerary mask or shroud made from papyrus and then decorated, from the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty. This cartonnage had survived centuries in a tomb only to be pillaged and sold—and then severely damaged in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. On one painted fragment, the eye of this unknown Egyptian ruler gazes at the viewer, but this artifact cannot tell us who he (or she) is, when he lived, or the great deeds that may have been done in his name. The 19<sup>th</sup> century rush to collect





Left and far right: Cherkea conducted fieldwork in Coalbrookdale, where the first steel furnace in England was unearthed. Center: At the Leontari Cave on Mount Hymettos in Athens, Greece, Cherkea's team uncovered Neolithic pottery and figurines.

ancient objects by the historic explorers who pillaged cities and cemeteries for treasure rendered this artifact, and many others, silent.

Information such as the material the objects are made of, how they were made, and how they are decorated can tell us a lot, but they do not provide context. Archaeologists can show us, for example, if a house was built on top of a burial site, or if a marble statue was turned into construction material for a city wall. Discovering different materials like pottery, figurines, and coins together helps us understand more about the people who used those objects. Think about what your home and the objects inside would say about you: the types of dishes and lamps and furniture you use would identify your culture, the time period in which you live, and your social and economic status in society. Information like this helps archaeologists understand ancient people and their society; it increases not just the value of a site, but also our collective knowledge. Destroying these contexts—or recklessly removing objects from them—does the opposite. Unfortunately, objects without context continue to circulate, fueled by and encouraging further looting endeavors.

### **The Ethical Revolution**

Just a few decades ago, museums routinely accepted gifts and made purchases without worrying about how the antiquities they were acquiring came to the art market. For most museums, the goal was simply to have the best objects to display. Increasing their collections was more important than ethical concerns. Museum employees or the board of governors accepted what was offered in good faith, trusting their profit-making suppliers.

In the 1960s, during what is known as the “ethical

revolution,” the field of archaeology undertook a real examination of the ethics of collecting archaeological artifacts. This revolution was fueled by the frustration of researchers who kept encountering unprovenanced materials (those without context) in museums, the increased destruction of archaeological sites by looters, and the exportation of objects from countries despite laws designed to protect cultural heritage. Such concerns were most notably reflected in the 1970 Pennsylvania Declaration, in which the staff of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology resolved to purchase only objects with a provenance.

I first started thinking about the problem of looting during my fieldwork in Greece. There, I learned about Cycladic figures, which were created by the peoples living in the Cyclades (a group of islands in Greece) during the Aegean Bronze Age. Such figurines were found in ancient cemeteries that have been looted since the 18th century, and you can find them on display in major museums worldwide. Thinking about these problems fueled my decision to embark on a more in-depth study. While undertaking a second master's degree, this time in museum studies at New York University, I also got involved with the non-profit organization Saving Antiquities for Everyone (SAFE).

SAFE was established in 2003 in the aftermath of the ransacking of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. The organization's mission is to “raise public awareness about the irreversible damage that results from looting, smuggling, and trading illicit antiquities.” My work with SAFE focused on the museum side of this trade, since museums have acquired objects that were looted and smuggled out of their countries of origin. I conducted interviews, wrote papers, and organized events to help increase awareness of the effects of lax ethical policies on society.



## Saving Antiquities for Everyone

Through activities including private tours of museum exhibitions, lectures, advocacy campaigns, and candlelight vigils in commemoration of historic events, SAFE raises public awareness about the damage caused by looting and trading of illicit antiquities. SAFE's global scope encompasses both national and international issues, from looting in New Mexico to the destruction of archaeological sites in China. Learn more at [www.savingantiquities.org](http://www.savingantiquities.org).

### Lessons from Looting

Fortunately, in the last decade, most major metropolitan museums have revised their ethical policies and implemented further policy changes because of organizations such as the International Council of Museums and the American Association of Museums. Due diligence—referring to the investigation of provenance or ownership history—is now expected of public museums. Our current ethical position assumes that the looting of archaeological sites, as well as selling or buying artifacts that have been ripped from the ground, is wrong. When a museum purchases or accepts donations of these objects, it contributes to the destruction of history, which is in direct conflict with a cultural institution's mission to preserve and educate.

My research on museum ethics focused on how museums present this type of information and whether visitors to exhibitions are aware of these issues. In an online survey of the general public that I conducted in 2009, the majority of participants believed that organizations such as SAFE, blogs, and publications (books, magazines, and newspapers) help hold museums accountable for ethical behavior. Today, questionable practices draw media attention, arousing public scrutiny that puts additional pressure on museums to conduct acquisitions ethically. Recently, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, among others, all returned artifacts they had acquired to their countries of origin, including Egypt, Turkey, and Greece. This demonstrates a greater awareness by the museums to address past improprieties. However, I worry that explanations about looting and provenance are largely absent in the galleries and exhibitions.

Museums should be reassured by my findings that the public does not let ethical problems, especially in historic cases, affect their visitorship. If museums acknowledge controversy and present information about provenance (or the lack of it), people will still continue to visit. Instead of driving people away, such information has the potential to educate the public and allow them to be more critical explorers—and protectors—of cultural history.

Archaeologists, museum staff and officers, and the public agree that illicitly obtained and traded antiquities prevent us from fully understanding the past. We have to work together to make sure that cultural heritage sites are protected and that the objects unearthed from them are documented and preserved. We can put looters out of business only when the value of ancient artifacts is measured not in dollars but in the information they reveal about history and humanity. **i**

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## Dig Deeper at the Museum

The next time you go to a museum, think about how the objects on display have come to their current locations and the meanings produced or omissions concealed in the display.

### Questions that you could be asking include:

- Where did this object come from? How did it get here?
- Who made or used this object? Who put it in the display case and why?
- What kinds of objects are displayed with it? Why? What makes all these objects unique?
- What information is the museum providing? What is the museum not telling me?
- How can I find out more? Does the museum provide these resources?

When you ask and answer questions like these, you will see so much more history than is actually on display—and you will know how important it is to protect it.

—Cherkea Howery

### For further reading

*Loot, Legitimacy and Ownership: The Ethical Crisis in Archaeology* by Colin Renfrew (Duckworth Publishers, 2009).

*The Medici Conspiracy: The Illicit Journey of Looted Antiquities—from Italy's Tomb Raiders to the World's Greatest Museums* by Peter Watson and Cecilia Todeschini (Public Affairs, 2006).

*Stealing History: the Illicit Trade in Cultural Material* by Neil Brodie, Jenny Doole, and Peter Watson (St. Martin's Griffin, 2006).