

Archaeology and the Ethics of Collecting

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A major national magazine recently ran on its cover a photo of a handsome Maya jadeite mask, suggesting that the piece had originally been dug up by looters. The magazine also reported that the piece was for sale at an exorbitant price. The cover depicting this object and an article within the issue in defense of private collecting rocked the archaeological community, and underscored the growing rift between scientific archaeologists and art historians and epigraphers, who often use looted material in their research. The controversy also raised some ugly questions about the discipline of archaeology, the majority of them revolving around the deprivations caused by the intertwined evils of collecting and looting. It is important to ask, for instance, if the portrayal of a looted artifact on the cover of a national magazine raises its value on the illicit art market. Or is its appearance offset by educating the public about the serious problem of a burgeoning black market in looted antiquities? Even more controversial, however, is any stance sanctioning the collecting of illicitly recovered objects.

Some archaeologists feel strongly that every artifact shown publicly or used as a kingpin in arguments about ancient societies must have an archaeological pedigree—it must have been properly excavated. They must know precisely where it comes from to tell its story. Without any indication of its origins and context, it is deemed worthless by some, or at best unreliable. Many institutions, the Archaeological Institute of America among them, have taken strong stands against illegal traffic in antiquities and will not knowingly publicize looted objects for fear of increasing their market value.

The controversy concerns not only intent, but results. How can one defend, either directly or indirectly, the rape of the past? Doesn't buying the fruits of such an enterprise only make the collector an accomplice in the crime? Today's private collectors, however, usually point to the beginnings of archaeology to justify their attitudes.

In its infancy, the discipline was primarily concerned with collecting artifacts. A number of prominent individuals

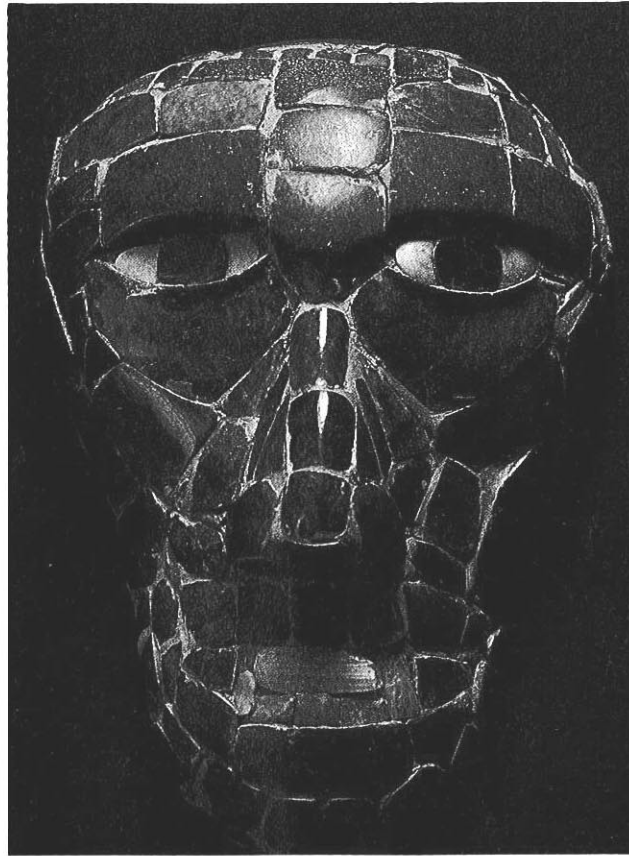
of the 1800s were indeed antiquarians or collectors. In that era, collecting was believed to be both a mode of science and a way to advance knowledge. But while the destructive excavation methods of the antiquarians may have been similar to those in use by looters today, even then antiquarians usually recorded at least some details about the context of their finds—something looters don't do.

By World War I, archaeology had grown out of this stage. Today, an archaeologist "collects" data and, more important, "collects" context. Collecting objects is not, in and of itself, scholarship. It is the collecting of information in a scientific way that characterizes archaeology. To liken the archaeologist and the looter to one another—as some have done—is to project a false and simplified version of what archaeology is all about. The ethical and moral responsibilities involved in carrying out archaeology are found in neither the world of the looter nor that of the collector. In fact, the looter and collector are so intertwined that neither could exist without the other. The case of the robbery of Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology on Christmas Eve 1985 serves as a grave warning. Here, the looters stole certain objects "on order," much as big-city car thieves steal a given make and model of auto. When people will rob an institution to satisfy the collector's greed, no cultural resource in the world is safe.

But where do these heated

differences of opinions come from and who are the various parties that are concerned with ancient artifacts? Archaeologists, art historians, epigraphers, museums, government officials, collectors, looters, and dealers each have their own concerns. But who are the rightful guardians of the past and what are the responsibilities that go hand-in-hand with such guardianship? Professional obligations cannot be ignored. Looted or fraudulent pieces have sometimes been made respectable by noted scholars, either through publication or exhibits. The authentication and valuation of non-pedigree pieces constitutes irresponsible behavior.

The archaeologists of today have inherited the conse-



This rare jadeite mask, excavated at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, is similar to one dug up by looters and offered for sale at an exorbitant price.

