

“CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CLANDESTINE ART TRADE”

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I speak as a professional, American art historian, each of which qualifications affects what I have to say. As a professional art historian (as opposed, say, to a critic) I am interested in the significance of works of art, not whether they are good or bad or beautiful or ugly. And although I may study the political contexts of works of art I am not myself partisan to any political attitude toward them. The relevance of American-ness in this context was best expressed by Erwin Panofsky when, after immigrating to the United States, he described the difference in attitude between his new American and his former European colleagues. Whereas French and German scholars battled furiously and patriotically about the French or German origins of Gothic architecture, American scholars, able to approach the problem without a nationalistic *parti pris*, did not care who won!

I want to present my thoughts under three headings, the first of which concerns what I call “localization rationale,” that is, reasons for works of art being located in one place rather than another. Here one must distinguish between site-specific and independent works. Although such sacrileges have been committed often, no one would defend removing Michelangelo’s frescos from the Sistine chapel, unless there were some imminent danger of losing them altogether; we need to see them *in situ* in order to comprehend important aspects of their significance. The case is different with many, perhaps most independent works, which were often made specifically for export (ancient Greek pottery, for example). If you study works of art diachronically, you might argue that all the works of Van Gogh should be together (even though he hoped people would

buy them and take them home), but if you want to study them contextually, it might be best to have them in Paris, near the works of artists who deeply influenced him, or in the south of France, where he painted many of them, and where you might compare them with the landscapes they represent. Or your interest may be synchronic, as with the cross-cultural studies that have become so important in modern times. If you want to compare the classical period of the Mayas with the classical period of Greece, the best place to do it would be London or New York. I remember puzzling why a medical student from India I met who was interested in exotic, especially tropical diseases, had come to New York; the reason, he said, was that you can study more varieties of exotic tropical diseases at one time in New York, than anywhere on earth. I conclude that dispassionate consideration offers little scientific argument for any consistent “localization rationale.”

The most powerful argument, however, is not dispassionate at all, but based on the highly charged concept of “National Cultural Heritage,” the second point I want to discuss. The concept, which covers a multitude of sins as well as virtues, resulted from the association between culture, especially ethnic culture, and politics that accompanied the development of Romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century. In the context of National Cultural Heritage, the localization rationale is usually based on the country of origin of the object (Italy claims pottery made in Greece if it is found in Italy) or of the artist (sometimes, as with the French claim to Picasso, on his country of residence). But this is not always the case. Recently, England declared that a painting by Titian, which was bought in Italy by a British aristocrat 200 years ago, had become part of the country’s National Heritage—the private collector as national culture hero! It is a way of

thinking that has its pitfalls—think what horrors the Nazis committed under the heading of national cultural heritage, including even a museum of the artifacts created by a soon to be extinct ethnic group.

For better or for worse, however, the concept of National Cultural Heritage is surely here to stay and the protectionism it engenders is largely responsible for one of the greatest current threats to the improvement of our understanding of the significance of works of art, by encouraging the clandestine excavations that destroy crucial contextual evidence. My third topic concerns possible remedies. In some measure, the problem has been alleviated by a growth in awareness and cautiousness on the part of museums, which are increasingly wary of acquiring works of art of dubious provenance. It has become fashionable to blame private collectors who are presumed, no doubt quite rightly, to be the primary recipients of illegally exported objects. But it is too often overlooked that private collectors—who, if given a choice and other things being equal, would surely prefer the legal purchase—have traditionally made fundamental contributions to public awareness and appreciation of art. What would museums be like without the donations of private collectors? But even more important than their philanthropy, is the spirit of adventure and discovery that motivates private collectors, no less and often much more than the desire for profit. Private collectors are the pioneers, the explorers, the venture capitalists of art, who take risks and derive satisfaction from the exercise of the imagination and the pride that discovery and ownership bring. In this sense, too, they confer great benefits on humanity, even on the countries that consider themselves abused. After all, private collectors (including Picasso and Matisse) were the first to confer upon

the art of Africa the kind of understanding and appreciation it enjoys today. And such examples are legion, beginning with the very beginning of collecting itself, in antiquity.

It seems to me that the most promising solution to the problem of illicitly traded antiquities is the system of “partage” which I first heard about in this context some 15 years ago from, paradoxically, a group of young, extremely left-wing (“Maoist”) archeologists in Italy. They dislike the very notion of “art,” and regarded all artifacts as evidence of the “material culture” of humankind, the history of which was their “true” concern. They were disturbed not so much by the exportation of objects as by the destruction of evidence that clandestine excavation entails. Their idea was to legalize excavation so that it could be properly organized and supervised. The finds would be divided between the government and the excavator, who would be free to sell his share on the open market. Nothing came of the idea, of course, but I suspect it is the best, and only realistic way to protect the interests of all concerned, including the “country of origin.” Partage, incidentally, was the basis on which the great, pioneering German excavations of ancient sites in Turkey and elsewhere were carried out during the last century. The splendid collections of antiquities in Germany, which have played an incalculable role in promoting world-wide interest in those countries and their national heritage, were acquired in exactly this way.