

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Museum Education and Archaeological Ethics: An Approach to the Illicit Trade of Antiquities

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Many museum educational programs and exhibitions worldwide, designed to communicate to the public the importance of archaeology, adopt a treasure hunt approach often inspired by emblematic mass culture figures, such as Indiana Jones or Lara Croft. Alternatively they organize exhibitions on the identification of fakes in the spirit of TV series such as *X-files* or *CSI*.

These programs usually avoid dealing with a fundamental issue in archaeological practice, which pertains to the paramount importance of context and the scientific consequences of its destruction through, among others, the illicit trade of antiquities. The hesitation in promoting this sensitive topic may be due to the fact that many objects in major museum collections are often unprovenanced. Although the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (2006, section 4.5) advises against displaying material of questionable origin, most museums do host such antiquities.

The paper explores how museums can begin to discuss the issue of context using the materials produced by the European Culture project *Witness the Past* (WTP): film documentaries or educational kits and related activities aimed at children on the topic of the importance of context and the destructive effects of the illicit trade of antiquities. The WTP project was implemented in three European museums as well as in Egypt and Jordan.

Keywords: Museum education; illicit trade of antiquities; ethics; children; Witness the Past

Museum Outreach and the Hollywood Narrative

Public engagement in science has used many educational approaches, such as well-established TV programs and computer games making use of recognizable symbols (i.e., the caricature of the mad scientist based on Einstein), resulting in the development of stereotypes, which influence the image of a scientific researcher, especially among

the youth (Christidou 2010; Montemayor 2013). In the case of archaeology, the same approach has led several museums worldwide to adopt recent cinematic figures around which they organize their education and outreach activities for the public (e.g. Krucoff 2003). This has led to extensive discussions by the academic and museum education communities concerning the merits and dangers of the so called 'Indiana Jones' approach as a means to attract interest in archaeology (Strong 2007). It is interesting that the recent Hollywood narratives of archaeologists as romantic and adventurous individuals remind us of earlier, pre World War II public conceptions, often promoted by archaeologists themselves (McGeough 2006). Unfortunately, most archaeology-inspired cinematic productions present a distorted view of the motives of the archaeologist by placing him/her at the service of fictitious government agencies (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*) or of super wealthy individuals with a mission to save the world (*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*). In either case, the archaeologist's research objective is absent from the narrative. McGeough (2006: 175) gives special emphasis to the funding issue in these films noticing that 'in most cases, the archaeologist uses funds given by private donors or institutions to fund the

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excavation. After the artifacts have been retrieved, the archaeologist either splits the loot with the private donors, or is paid cash settlement by the museum or government agency that retained his services'.

Our own understanding of the ongoing discussions concerning the impact of these narratives on archaeological practice and outreach is that archaeology is trying to 'have it both ways': first as a scientific discipline involving systematic and often tedious work, and at the same time as a discipline that can excite the imagination and attract young people. This ambivalence is best illustrated with reference to the American Institute's of Archaeology (AIA) definition of archaeology as being (AIA Education Department 2013: 2) '...unlike the image in cartoons and movies of archaeologists as treasure hunters, excavation requires extremely careful work...unfortunately, fascination with the past does not always translate to careful scientific study...' to be read in conjunction with the election of actor Harrison Ford to the AIA Board as '...Harrison Ford has played a significant role in stimulating the public's interest in archaeological exploration,...we are all delighted that he has agreed to join the AIA's Governing Board...' according to Brian Rose, President of the AIA (AIA Media 2008).

It is clear that an organization such as the AIA is able to resolve and accommodate this ambivalence through thoughtful planning. The fact remains however, that for the public at large, Hollywood's narrative on archaeology is more likely to prevail (Rakestraw and Reynolds 2001). So far the discussion on the impact of the Hollywood narrative has focused on the public perception of archaeology in the countries where this narrative originates, mainly the United States and the United Kingdom. One should keep in mind, however, that the public in the so-called 'source' countries (the Mediterranean, Latin America or the Middle East) are equally exposed and influenced by this narrative. Furthermore, most source countries rely on archaeological and cultural tourism to support their economies, and in this sense the visitors' attitude to archaeological sites and practices is of direct concern.

The *Witness The Past* project (WTP website) was conceived as a means to communicate to the source countries' public at large and to children in particular the importance of context in archaeological practice, and to counteract the fetishized view of archaeological artifacts often promoted by the Hollywood narrative and by another recent trend; museum exhibitions on fakes and forgeries.

Museum Exhibitions on Fakes and Forgeries

Art or archaeological crime is usually presented in museum programs in the form of exhibition of fakes alongside histories about forgers full of mystery and adventures (Jarus 2010; The National Gallery (London) 2010; Royal Ontario Museum 2010; V&A Museum 2010). Museums do not traditionally discuss their fakes openly in order to avoid the embarrassing admission that they have been deceived and the shaking of public faith in museum expertise (Newsom and Silver 1978). There is also a fear of offending donors or lenders (Muscarella 2007), a fear of the unavoidable discussion on the objects acquisition procedure, possible

implication of the police, etc. From time to time, they downgrade specific objects simply by quietly removing them from display. Lately however, more museums appear to tackle this problem systematically and openly. The Brooklyn Museum of Art for example, has recently admitted that a third of its Coptic sculptures are modern fakes and set up an exhibition on them (Bailey 2008). Another example is the publication of the authentication studies carried out on the crystal skulls of the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, both revealed to be modern manufactures (Sax *et al.* 2008).

Museums organizing exhibitions on archaeological or art fakes are multiplying every year (e.g. The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology 2013). In 2010, four museums (V&A Museum, Royal Ontario Museum, The National Gallery (London), and Detroit Institute of Arts) decided to discuss publicly the problem of forgeries. The visitors had the chance to see a diverse collection of fake artifacts and/or paintings and become informed on the history of their production and unmasking. In certain cases, there was also a detailed scientific approach to the unmasking of the fakes, including information on the application of advanced techniques on disputed artifacts. The intriguing stories of how forgers create convincing fakes, manage to fool museum experts, and sometimes sell these fakes for shocking amounts of money are considered a means by which to attract large numbers of visitors, and they do. In many cases 'detective' games are organized for the visitors where they are asked to crack the mystery themselves and spot the fake objects against the original ones (Royal Ontario Museum 2010, Detroit Institute of Arts 2010). The game has become so popular that there are also websites where someone can play an online game on the topic (Brooklyn Museum 2009).

On the one hand, exhibitions of fakes appear to be a very smart way to educate visitors by making them take a closer look at the artifacts, learn about modern authentication techniques and enjoy their visit by playing detective-like games (Newsom and Silver 1978). In art museums, some believe that such exhibitions may 'oversimplify questions of quality' and for this reason are more suitable for University art museums than general art museums (Newsom and Silver 1978), or that they promote the idea of creating fakes. On the other hand, games like 'spot the differences between fakes and real artifacts' may promote the collection of antiquities as well as the idea that there is nothing wrong with authentic objects without provenance (Landesman 2001).

An exhibition of forgeries would be the ideal context for a museum to approach the issues of artifacts without context and of the illicit trafficking of archaeological or art objects. Fakes or disputed artifacts are certainly unexcavated, and topics like the importance of finding an object in its archaeological context as opposed to viewing an artifact as a 'work of art' could be discussed at this opportunity. But in a typical exhibition of fakes, the fact that the object is unexcavated, its source is an art dealer and it has no provenance or history is usually ignored. This is of course a very tricky issue to be raised for many museums, since the acquisition of some of the objects in

their collections may not have been in accordance with the 1970 UNESCO Convention (UNESCO 1970).

Museum Exhibitions Dealing with Unprovenanced or Looted Antiquity

There are few museum exhibitions that have dealt with the topic of illicit trade of antiquities: a portable exhibit, called *Stealing History* (Brodie *et al.* 2000; Doole 2006) was produced on the topic by the Illicit Antiquities Research Center (McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research), with the support of the A.G. Leventis Foundation. At that time, it was available on loan, free of charge to museums, libraries and suitable institutions in the United Kingdom. The exhibit, under the headings 'Illicit Antiquities', 'Why Archaeology?', 'Why Loot?', and 'The Way Forward', explained basic issues: why the general public should be concerned about archaeological looting, the benefits of archaeology as opposed to looting, and possible ways forward.

History Lost (Brodie and Apostolidis 2007) is a well-known multimedia exhibition produced in 2006 under the framework of the European CULTURE 2000 program about the illicit trade of antiquities around the world, and demonstrates how objects lose their historic value when they are taken out of their native setting (figure 1). The exhibition consists of illuminated panels, interactive games and documentary screenings. The exhibition also presents replicas of illicitly traded ancient objects. The exhibition was presented in Nicosia, Athens, Ancient Nemea, Trieste, Lisbon, Dublin, Brussels, and Belgrade with an estimated of 70,000 visitors (Anemon Productions 2006). The exhibition took place at a time when the ethics of Western museums were being debated, and many well-known museums were revealed to have acquired and displayed artifacts by infamous collectors and dubious dealers.

Other examples often involve repatriation of antiquities to the country hosting the exhibit, and usually host a conference on the same theme as part of the inauguration of the exhibit. For example, The Egyptian Museum of Cairo, which created the exhibition *Returning Stolen Antiquities* in April 2010 after hosting a conference on the same topic (Hawass 2010). The exhibit featured artifacts that had been returned to Egypt, including the coffin of Imesy recently returned from Miami (*Looting Matters* April 1 2010), and the head of Amenhotep III (*Looting Matters* December 23 2008). Panels that described the problems of looted antiquities and the solutions that Egypt has implemented surrounded the artifacts, along with stories of success. The end of the exhibit featured a 'wish list' for the return of certain objects to Egypt found in museums abroad.

Another important example is the conference and exhibition hosted by the New Acropolis museum entitled *Nostoi: Recovered Masterpieces* in September 2008 and was on display until January 2009. It featured 74 masterpieces of Greek, Etruscan and Roman art that were returned to Italy and Greece from major museums and private collections in the US and Europe, proven to be taken from illegal excavations (Hellenic Ministry of Culture 2008). Italy, after concerted efforts by the Prosecutor of Rome and the



Fig. 1: History Lost Exhibition. The photo shows the use of an interactive map with information about the illicit trade of antiquities in more than 40 countries and regions worldwide ©Anemon Productions 2007.

Carabinieri Administration for Cultural Heritage, managed to dismantle one of the largest international networks of antiquities. The exhibition included rare artifacts, such as the Euphronios krater, a golden wreath from Macedonia, fragments of frescoes from Pompeii, and many others. Moreover, the New Acropolis Museum showed a fragment of the Parthenon frieze from the Museum of Palermo (BBC News 2010), in support of the effort to return the Parthenon marbles removed from the Acropolis in the 19th century and have been held in the British Museum since then. The frieze was returned to Italy in 2008, as it was only a temporary loan.

WTP Children's Museum Program on the Importance of Context in Archaeology and on the Illicit Trade of Antiquities

WTP was a two year EC funded project that began in January 2010 under the Culture Program (2007–2013) where the main objective was to carry out a publicity campaign in one of the most visited museums in the world, The Egyptian Museum in Cairo and its Children's Museum, and implement an educational children's program in Egypt, Jordan, Greece, Cyprus, and Germany on the importance of the proper excavation of archaeological sites. The main thrust of the project was to prevent pillaging of sites that have yet to be identified or inventoried.



Video 1: The Secret Passage, short animation. To view the video, see DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1021210.1>. Created by Technical and Educational Institute of Athens (TEI Athens), and copyrighted TEI Athens & Anemon Productions 2011. For more information visit: <http://www.witnessthepast.gr>



Fig. 2: A group of blind children visiting the Children's Museum at the Egyptian Museum of Cairo and interacting with the LEGO displays ©Egyptian Museum of Cairo.

The objective was to design, produce, and promote educational material to teach children the importance of scientific excavation in determining historical information about archaeological finds and their setting (**video 1**). The project created three ten-minute films that highlighted the importance of context, archaeological excavation, and authentication accompanied by lesson plans for the teacher or museum educator. Each film and lesson plan examined one case study to bring alive the excitement of archaeological discovery and convey the topic of the project. Special attention was given to ensure that blind children could participate in all programs, which included a special voice-over for the blind (**figure 2**). The language of choice was English, Greek, Arabic, and German (participating co-organizers for the project). The documentary series targeted children aged 8–12. It was entitled *The Hidden Room* and provided a novel twist on archaeology, bringing ancient relics, history and science to life in a fun and powerful way. Each episode explored a story of looting and

sensational archaeological discovery in an attempt to shed light on history itself and transport a young audience into the past.

The documentary series encouraged children and their families to come face-to-face with archaeological discoveries and the looting of antiquities across the Mediterranean; in Greece, Cyprus and Egypt. Viewers discover how objects have been looted, stolen or retrieved and travel into hidden tombs, foreign countries and ancient civilizations. They also witness the discovery of invaluable archaeological artifacts and are encouraged to understand that knowledge of an object's history is lost when a site is plundered. The films are based on stunning photography of archaeological sites and their surrounding landscape, from the hidden tombs of Aidonia in the Peloponnese, to the underground cache at Deir el-Bahri, Luxor and the plains of Cyprus.

The film and lesson plan for Greece describes the looting that took place in Aidonia. In the mid 1970's, in the Greek village of Aidonia, a Mycenaean beehive tomb was discovered by a villager. Villagers began looting the site and they sold the golden jewelry and intact pottery to middlemen, who transported the treasure to Munich hidden in trucks bearing watermelons. Several years later, archaeologists excavated the looted tombs. The tombs had been emptied but jewelry was discovered intact in one tomb. The stolen goods remained out of sight for 13 years until they were discovered in a small gallery in New York. The artifacts were eventually returned to Greece (Elia 1995; Miller 1996).

For Egypt, the film describes the looting that occurred in the 19th century in the cliffs in Deir el-Bahri in Luxor, Egypt by a family. The family's young child, burdened with the guilt of looting so many tombs with his family, informed the police and the family was arrested (Salam 1969). The looted mummies were immediately transported to the



Video 2: The Tomb of the Hidden Mummies, short film. To view the video, see DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jcms.1021210.2>. Created by Technical and Educational Institute of Athens (TEI Athens), and copyrighted TEI Athens & Anemon Productions 2011. For more information visit: <http://www.witnessthepast.gr>

Cairo Museum (Graefe and Belova 2010). Most of the mummies in the Cairo Museum today come from the cache at Deir el-Bahri (**video 2**).

For Cyprus, the movie tells the story of the extensive pillaging that took place on the island in the mid-19th century. The American consul in Cyprus, General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, became an amateur archaeologist in order to profit from the trade of antiquities. During his time on the island, he gathered around 35,000 objects, which were then auctioned to the Metropolitan Museum in New York as well as other museums (Waxman 2008). Turkish authorities were informed about the sale and prohibited the export of this enormous collection. Cesnola immediately loaded his treasures onto boats in order to remove them from Cyprus (**figure 3**).

Lesson plans accompany each movie in each respective language to help guide the museum educator or teacher if they wish to implement the program at a museum or in the classroom. The educational program was inaugurated and carried out at the museums represented in the project and aids were implemented, such as mock excavations, LEGO constructions, and exhibitions with replica artifacts (specially designed for school children and blind people) so as to reinforce the message of the movie and lesson plan. The movies and lesson plans are also available on CDs for other museums or schools interested in carrying out the program in the future.

One example of a popular activity carried out in Greece during the project was a detective story on the illicit trade of antiquities in a puppet theatrical play with ceramic dolls, created by a partner in the WTP, THETIS, with the theatrical group *Pseftia me Autia* (**figure 4**)¹. The performance combined the actor with the doll, using ceramic dolls that replicate original terracotta figurines and bell-shaped

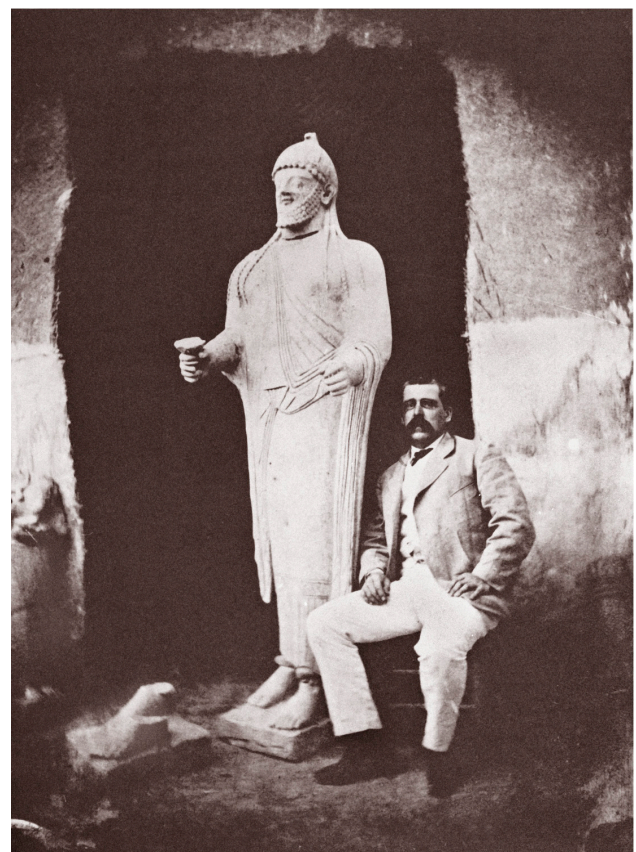


Fig. 3: General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, American consul in Cyprus 1865–1877 ©The Cultural Centre of the Popular Bank Group.

dolls from Athens, Corinth, Boeotia, Cyprus and Myrina (Asia Minor) acquired by European Museums during the 2nd half of 19th century. They are exhibited at the British



Fig. 4: School children at the Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Athens during an event organized for the WTP program, touching the ceramic dolls after viewing the performance of the puppet play. The play was created by a partner in the WTP, THETIS with the theatrical group *PseutiameAutia*. ©TEI of Athens and THETIS.

Museum, the Louvre and the Museum of Acropolis. The script (Aloupi and Fostini 2011) posed the question of authenticity and aimed at increasing public awareness of smuggling antiquities. The loss/preservation of cultural heritage (antiquities) was indirectly related to the loss/revocation of personal memory by providing the psychological background in a modern history of action and mystery. The contribution of THETIS team to the project was important to help attract Greek children to the program and provided the artifacts (ceramic puzzles, museum copies and ceramic toys) used in most of the hands on activities in Greece. THETIS has extensive experience in providing educational activities and specialized educational kits (i.e. digging and conservation kits) for children involving modern reproductions of ancient artifacts. Our goal is for the educational program directed towards children and the general public to stigmatize the practice of collecting antiquities as works of art, especially for looted antiquities, and in accordance with the 1970 UNESCO Convention (UNESCO 1970). However, our children program tries not to address issues such as 'who owns antiquity' or legal problems involving collection of antiquities, but rather proposes that educational programs especially for children should emphasize on the importance of finding an artifact in its context, and understanding its use and production technology. Issues involving repatriation of unprovenanced artifacts to their country of origin can be raised in a separate discussion, if the museum educator or teacher believes it is necessary to address the issue regarding their country.

Through the project's website, films, lesson plans and associated material is provided in English to teachers and museum educators as freely downloadable material (WTP website). The goal is to allow as many children and parents to have access to the children's program, rather than wait for a museum to take the decision to support this project.

Conclusions

The question remains how museums in both source and market countries can help educate the general public and especially children, and stigmatize the practice of collecting antiquities as works of art when these were acquired after 1970. Some museums may hesitate to deal with topics that address illicit trafficking of antiquities because it may bring up a controversy in regard to their own history of acquiring antiquities, whether recent or in the past. Museums in source countries may not have the means to develop such educational programs or may favor exhibitions dealing with the repatriation of objects. Museums may consider it embarrassing to highlight the problem due to the inability of their governments to protect archaeological sites or museums during times of crises. It may thus be preferable for a consortium of institutions that represent both museums from market and source countries to develop educational programs on the importance of context in archaeology and on the illicit trade of antiquities.

The WTP project has brought together many museum professionals, academics, scientists, archaeologists, and film producers to inspire a movement against the trafficking of antiquities worldwide. When the project began, no one could have foreseen the crises that developed in the Arab world. Apart from the loss of human life, the cultural heritage of Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have been systematically looted from museums and archaeological sites. The extent of the destruction is still unknown, but we hope that our program will help to educate a new generation of citizens to protect their cultural heritage, especially in times of crisis around the world.

Notes

- ¹ Produced by THETIS Authentics and the *Pseftia me Autia* theatrical group. Co-funded by WTP, Culture 2000 EU project.

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