
The "Stolen Art" Debate

Is Education Still the Metropolitan's Top Priority?

by Cindy Ho



What must the Italian Culture Ministry be thinking after reading statements in the February 28 *New York Times* by Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art? On February 21, the Museum signed a landmark agreement in Rome in which it ceded ownership of nearly two dozen prized antiquities that Italy claimed had been looted from Italy and smuggled out of the country, bringing to a decade-long investigation to a close.

After reading the Rome agreement and the *Times* article side by side, a question comes to mind, "What does the Met's director truly believe?" On February 21, Mr. de Montebello affirmed, "the Museum deplores the illicit and unscientific excavation of archaeological materials and ancient art from archaeological sites, the destruction or defacing of ancient monuments and the theft of works of art from individuals, museums or other repositories."

Yet, days later, Mr. de Montebello told the *Times* that the importance of ancient objects' historical context has been exaggerated. "It continues to be my view—and not my view alone—that the information that is lost [by plundering archeological sites] is a fraction of the information that an object can provide...98 percent of everything we know about antiquity we know from objects that were not out of digs." Citing the Euphronios krater, the most famous of the items the Met agree to return to Italy, he said, "How much more would you learn from knowing which particular hole in—supposedly Cerveteri—it came out of?" Does Mr. de Montebello stand by the February 21 statement?

Again, on February 21, Mr. de Montebello affirmed, "the Museum is committed to the responsible acquisition of archaeological materials and ancient art according to the principle that all collecting be done with the highest criteria of ethical and professional practice." Yet, according to the *Times*, the Met's director "remained highly skeptical of recent international trends that have drastically reined in museums' antiquities collecting" and "lamented the general shift in thinking about antiquities collecting that has forced museums to change their practices and given the claims of countries like Italy so much weight."

On the one hand, Mr. de Montebello told the *Times*, "it is wrong—and clearly wrong—to remove objects from a site clandestinely without proper documentation." In 1996, for example, a *tombarolo* had confessed to looting 15 pieces of Hellenistic silver, the largest group of antiquities ceded by the Museum on February 21, from a site near Morgantina, Sicily. Even so, "to perpetuate forever that these things come from Morgantina, that is also a sin," said the Met's director without explanation. When the *Times* reporter mentioned seeing the hole in Morgantina where the silver had been found, Mr. de Montebello said, "there are lots of holes in Sicily—please...I believe in Santa Claus, too."

In the February 21 agreement, Mr. de Montebello affirmed, "the interests of the public are served by art museums around the world working to preserve and interpret our shared cultural heritage." But if this is the case, why did the Museum remove the Morgantina silver from view after Italy first demanded its return? And why does the Museum's website continue to describe the Euphronios krater in its "Timeline of Art History" as having come from "The Balkan Peninsula," when it clearly was found in Italy? Is education truly the Museum's top priority?

To fulfill the educational mission that allows the Metropolitan Museum of Art to operate as a tax-exempt institution, the public should have access to full and complete information about the artifacts in its collections—particularly objects acquired from countries with strict laws on the export of cultural property.

To declare, as Mr. de Montebello told the *Times*, that 98 percent of all we know about the ancient world comes from objects of unknown origin pulled from looted sites is a gross exaggeration. But there is no doubt that the keys to our undiscovered past, still in the ground, represents the ultimate non-renewable resource. These assets must be protected and studied by specialists before the history that intact sites contain is destroyed by looters.