ART MARKET DIRTY DEALINGS



It was the way the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York described its plans for 57,000 square feet of extended gallery space that caught my eye:

“We have a sacred obligation to put this material on view,” said museum director Philippe de Montebello

[BBC link]

He is talking about 5000 Graeco-Roman artifacts, currently in store at the museum. A sacred duty because these items are seen as artistic treasures?



The gallery is to be named after Shelby White and the late Leon Levy – two of the world’s most voracious of private collectors af antiquities. This is just the latest in a series of links between private collectors, the art market and some major museums. The Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the J. Paul Getty Museum are regularly criticised for continuing to purchase and exhibit unprovenanced antiquities, and for refusing to uphold guidelines and initiatives that would stop their supply – it is clear that looting is almost always the source of antiquities that come with no information about their origin. They have also been the venues for several exhibitions of private collections of

antiquities that clearly include looted items. Shelby White and Leon Levy exhibited their collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1990; Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Mailbu and the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1994-5; George Ortiz at the Royal Academy, London in 1994.

The connection between unprovenanced antiquities and looting is not in dispute. These museums are providing a cultural laundering service for the antiquities black market and for the collectors who depend upon it. And both, of course, make a lot of money out of it, while museums can self-righteously claim kudos for displaying art for the benefit of all humankind.

The titles of these exhibitions say a lot: Glories of the Past, A Passion for Antiquities, In Pursuit of the Absolute. Antiquities here belong to the world of the connoisseur who admires the object in itself for its artistic qualities of supposedly universal human value (absolute beauty, whatever). This high cultural value (these are the greatest achievements of civilization) is also, of course, a high monetary value. It is a matter of cultural capital – the high value associated with items of high cultural status.

It is a dangerous commonplace to think that it is good to admire the beauty of ancient works of art in themselves. This separates the artifact, however beautiful it is, from everything that tells us anything more about it. Hence it fuels an art market in looted antiquities because illegally looted antiquities come with little or no information about their origin – for obvious reason.

But these museums and collectors refuse to acknowledge this connection. Shelby White has even been implicated in politcal moves to weaken the agreements and legislation that came after the crucial 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property – see Nancy Wilkie, President of the Archaeological institute of America, on Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in Archaeology Magazine Nov/Dec 2000. Collectors want to buy and sell whatever they want, without archaeologists interfering. There is a line of argument promoted by Shelby White that collectors truly revere and preserve the past for posterity while archaeologists destroy it. This is what lies behind Philippe de Montebello's conviction that it is the *sacred duty* of the Metropolitan Museum to display its antique works of art.

See also UK Parliament Committee considering portable antiquities – April 2000 [link]

See what I was saying about cultural property last month [link]