

Collecting ancient art, an old tradition under attack.

Ladies and gentlemen. First I would like to thank Art Connoisseurs for inviting me as chairman of IADAA to contribute to this program. This is a nice opportunity for me to talk about collecting antiquities. I have learned that there is a lot of misunderstanding about collectors of ancient art and the legitimate trade, so I will use the opportunity to clarify some major issues. The second part of my presentation will cover the way the media have reported the current conflict in the near east, especially illegal digging, smuggling and the alleged sale of illegal antiquities as source of terror financing.

But before I start, let me first make it perfectly clear that,

- The trade is as horrified by the destruction and iconoclasm as anyone else and we share a common cause in wishing to defeat it.
- The trade has more incentive than anyone else to stop the crooks because of the damage they are causing to the reputation of the legitimate trade.
- We will not find a workable solution unless all parties to the debate work together, including the trade.

Unfounded stories

Over the past couple of years a lot of unfounded stories and mind-bending but groundless figures have dominated the media coverage of the current disaster in the near east. Newspapers and news aggregation websites copying each other without investigating properly, TV reporters neglecting to check facts, and a small but dedicated group of archaeologists and bloggers cynically exploiting this international tragedy have all helped misinformation and propaganda go viral on the internet and shape the debate.

Some campaigners' livelihoods appear to depend on funding to further these aims and what now some openly state as their ultimate goal: a total ban on the legitimate trade in antiquities.

We the legitimate trade are expected to provide full provenance information on the objects we sell. The same rules should apply to every participant in the debate: show us the primary source of what you tell us, or be silent. Everything I am going to tell you today is documented, so feel free to get in touch with me after the meeting and I can give you the primary source of anything I have said today. In the debate we expect nothing less from our adversaries. Vague phrases like "experts tell us", "it is believed" or "there are indications" etc. are not good enough anymore. Who is the expert? And where do your indications come from? In other words: in the debate we expect to see **facts based on evidence** (as accepted by the law) **and not stories based on speculation.**

A short history of collecting of antiquities

Antiquities have been collected for thousands of years. The Romans were keen collectors of Greek sculpture, shipping Greek marble and bronze statues by the thousands to Rome. One of the first great collectors and one of the fathers of archaeology was Sir William Hamilton, British ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples in the 18th century. During his first three years in Naples he collected 3000 painted Greek vases, sometimes directly from where they were found, but also in local antiquities shops like this shop in Naples. In 1772 he sold a collection of 1000 painted Greek vases for 8000 pounds to the British Museum, where it is still the core of their Greek Collection.

During the era of the Grand Tour, from the 17th till the end of the 19th century, hundreds of young men went yearly to a region that we now know as Italy and later also to Greece, at the time part of the Ottoman empire, to admire the remains of ancient cultures. Many of them brought back examples of ancient art that they purchased from local dealers or just were offered alongside the road. At the time there were no laws in this respect. In 1734 the Society of Dilettanti was founded in London, for those who had been at the Grand Tour. The impression is that they were equally interested in culture and alcohol.

Just to give you an idea on what scale archaeological items were collected in those early years, I will give you some more examples. One of the many Greek sanctuaries excavated in Sicily in the 1800s produced over 30,000 terracotta statues, (produced from moulds in antiquity) the majority of which was sold to dealers and collectors. In the last quarter of the 19th century, Lady Meux traveled with a manservant on a steamer to Egypt in order to collect antiquities. She brought home a collection of 1,700 objects, (enough to fill today five galleries with ancient art). After her death the objects were sold at auction.

Export licences

In Egypt, in 1912 a law was issued that permitted licensed dealers to trade and export antiquities. From old invoices with export permits, we know that at least 120 licensed dealers were active in Egypt between 1912 and 1979. In room 56 of the national museum in Cairo, “the saleroom”, one could buy authentic antiquities, with an export licence. Over 67 years, the export of antiquities was a major source of income for Egypt.

So all Egyptian objects exported under licence do have an iron-clad provenance, don't they? “Show me the corresponding licence: problem solved.”

Unfortunately it is not as easy as that. Here you see an invoice from licensed dealer Nr 116 for an unknown number of antiquities exported to France. The stamps and signatures show the export tax has been paid. However, the description is limited to “antiquities over 100 years old”. These 120 or so dealers were allowed to export as long as they paid the corresponding tax. To be able to control that, it was the number of cases for the transport that was important, not the exact content. That is why today, hardly any of the objects exported under licence over almost 70 years can be individually distinguished. The Nestor of our trade, Dr Jerome Eisenberg from Royal Athena galleries, told me that between 1947 and 1983 he alone imported from Egypt under licence 24,000 objects.

If we are offered today an object from a private collection, we try to establish if it was exported before 1983. If so, one can assume that it would have been exported under licence at the time.

One of the countries in the Near East that allowed the export of antiquities until 1988 was Lebanon. This invoice from the Asfan Brothers, members of the Lebanese antique dealers association, has descriptions, but, from the 1,000 objects, not one can be identified.

Also in Syria the export of important ancient objects from Syria was possible until the law of 1963, according to Professor Abdulkarim, the head of the Syrian antiquities authorities. But after that date, many minor objects have been exported from Syria with the consent of the Syrian customs authorities, many thousands of them as souvenirs, bought in antique shops in Damascus and Aleppo. Were these objects the products of looting? Probably not, more likely they were mainly chance finds, uncovered during agricultural labour or during building activities. When poor people pick these minor objects up and sell them, they save them from destruction. The antique shops sell them to interested foreign visitors, who cherish these little treasures in their collections.

The source of our objects

Over the past three centuries, thousands of private collections of ancient art have been formed in Europe and the USA. Some of those are now the nucleus of the collections of major museums outside the source countries. Private collectors have donated thousands of objects to these museums for centuries. The number of objects from ancient civilizations harboured in private collections today is many hundreds of thousands if not millions.

There is a rule of thumb that objects from private collections become available every 40-50 years, since even collectors are mortal. These collections are the source of the objects we want to trade in, also in future. Many of these objects have been repeatedly sold at public auction and have been through the hands of dealers. Do these objects have provenance? Yes they have. Is it demonstrable? No, it is unfortunately not in most cases. So what can we dealers do to avoid buying freshly looted objects?

Art dealers have to make their own judgment when they are offered objects from old (often inherited) collections, where the paperwork is missing. We all live in countries where laws are based on the principle of good faith (good faith is assumed, bad faith has to be proven). We verify the identity of the seller and ask for the history of the piece. If the history is credible, we will put it in writing in a provenance statement and have it signed by the seller. We pay at least a part of our purchase by bank, thus creating a paper trail, which adds to the ongoing provenance.

These are just some of IADAA's due diligence guidelines that members of our organization have to abide by. (In some countries this is now even compulsory under law.) If one is lucky, purchasing invoices have survived, but unfortunately, more often than not, invoices have disappeared over the years.

How many of you in this room can say, hand on heart, that you have a receipt for every item of value you have at home? If you have inherited an heirloom such as a clock or piece of jewellery from a parent or grandparent, do you have the paperwork going back to its original purchase, showing the legitimate trail back to its manufacture? What about your wedding ring? How would you feel if, unable to provide such paperwork, your possessions were confiscated and handed to the company that made them? Ridiculous? Well that is what dealers and collectors in ancient art face now.

International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art

Let me now please enlighten you a bit about IADAA:

Ladies and gentlemen, the past is a funny place, they do things differently there.

In the 1960s and '70s, "the old days", not all dealers in ancient art behaved like virtuous schoolboys, but those who founded the International Association of Dealers in Ancient Art in 1993 understood that a different attitude was vital and acted on the UNESCO 1970 Convention even before their respective governments did.

IADAA introduced a strict code of ethics and later formulated due diligence guidelines that I already mentioned, to serve not only the interests of clients but also the integrity of the objects themselves. At present, 30 members from eight countries belong to IADAA. Membership is highly sought after but hard to achieve; applications are rigorously vetted. Since 1996, each member of IADAA has been required to check all objects with a resale value of more than €5,000 with the Art Loss Register (ALR) – this now includes searching the Interpol database – as part of the IADAA due diligence procedure.

The current debate

One of the crucial distinctions so often overlooked in this heated recent public debate is the difference between the legitimate trade and the illicit trade. The failure to distinguish between the two has already led to poorly framed policy and regulation by NGOs and governments as the authorities react in haste to unsubstantiated speculation, rumour and propaganda in the wider media.

The most bizarre figures about the size of the illicit market are taken for granted and quoted by government officials without even thinking critically about their validity. What is worse, these false figures form the basis of draconian measures against “the trade” and result in the misdirection of the limited resources of law enforcement agencies such as yourselves.

This “multibillion illegal trade” with its “invisible mafia structures” has to be halted, officials shout from the rooftops. The urgency is underlined by the alleged size of the illicit market: Claims of \$2-3 billion followed by \$6-8 billion have done the rounds, while the winner is der Spiegel, who in August 2015 claimed \$7-15 billion, quoting UNESCO as the source for their fake figures in order to give them credibility.

The truth is that nobody knows the size of the illicit market. So IADAA asked Ivan Macquisten, a journalist, to find the primary source of the \$2 billion.

He initially traced it back to a 2000 report by Brodie, Watson and Dooley, “Stealing History: The Illicit Trade in Cultural Material”, which quoted the figure and gave as its source an article in The Independent newspaper, “Great sale of the century”, by Geraldine Norman dating back to November 24, 1990. However, Ivan has now secured a copy of that article and **it gives no figure at all.** Brodie now publicly regrets ever quoting the (non-existent) figure, which may well be the source for the FBI’s figures.

So nobody knows the size of the illicit market, yet senior politicians in the United States continue to quote discredited figures in the hundreds of millions for the value of the trade in looted Syrian objects as justification for introducing new laws banning the import of even legitimate items and calling for further measures.

Just after the signing in the USA of such a new law, The Protect and Preserve Cultural Property Act, Dr Fiona Rose Greenland from University of Chicago, principal investigator for MANTIS (Modelling the antiquities trade in Iraq & Syria) published the results of her research. In her article of May 30th, ‘Inside ISIS’ looted a antiquities trade’, she concludes: **“ISIS is likely to have earned several million dollars in profit since launching its looting program... that is a far cry from \$ 7 billion”.**

She looks for an explanation and I quote her again: “And yet, patchy data and methodology challenges do not fully explain why 7 billion fell to 4 million in public discussions about the Isis antiquities trade. What’s really going on here, I think, can be explained in two ways. First, there is an over active collective imagination about how much art is actually worth... This, in turn, motivates governments and other groups opposing Islamic state to describe their actions in attention grabbing terms. It is a lot easier to call for action against a 7 billion crime than a 4 million crime. While market mystique and over the top lines are fine for Hollywood films and adventure novels, it is no way to understand terrorist finance. And without that understanding we are unlikely to arrive at genuine and lasting solutions.”

So we have established that an illicit market of several billions is nonsense as we, the trade, have said all along. How could we know that without researching it like Dr Greenland? The answer is simple, common sense, because we know what it takes to sell antiquities, well-provenanced antiquities in glossy catalogues, posh galleries and expensive art fairs. We have no idea about the real size of the illicit market, but what we do know is the size of the

legitimate market. IADAA carried out research on the size of the market of 2013; the combined sales figures of dealers and auction houses in the entire western world. The result is a reliable figure of €150 – 200 million. So where do the billions come from? No one can say.

It gets worse; despite all of this, campaigners still quote the ridiculous billions figure, making false comparisons with drugs trafficking, the illegal weapons trade and even human trafficking. This is done deliberately to make it look like a huge problem. In Germany the minister of culture Monika Grütters repeatedly stated for the past two years that the worldwide illegal trade in cultural property comes third in value after drugs and weapons. And she called for urgent action. However, if we check the **facts** in the yearly report about Illicit Trade from the World Customs Organisation, which is full of figures about drugs, weapons, cigarettes, alcohol and fake medicines to name just a few, no mention whatsoever is made about cultural property. The same minister Grütters is quoted in the newspapers over and over again, stating that Germany is becoming the hub of illegal trade in cultural property and that new stricter laws are needed to combat this terrible problem. Checking the **facts**, with the most recent statistics of the German customs, again, cultural property is not even mentioned in their 2014 and 2015 reports. The German newspaper Wirtschaftswoche specifically asked the ministry of finance on December 17th 2015, about this, and the answer was: “Customs has no information about illicit imports of cultural property into Germany or other EU countries, coming from museums, private collections or illicit excavations in the so-called IS controlled areas, especially Syria or Iraq.”

Now in France, the same bogus billions and claims of massive trafficking have been incorporated in the 120-page report to President Hollande by Mr Martinez, director of the Louvre. This will lead again to calls for action, wasting precious resources.

In Germany it has led to a research programme to do “dark field research” – no, not by the police, but headed by Professor Hilgert, an archaeologist and museum director. The program, called ILLICID, started in March 2015, receiving a grant of €1.2 million to unravel these alleged “invisible mafia like structures” in the huge illegal trade in antiquities. The interim report promised for March this year has not yet appeared...

At the end of last month in London, the Metropolitan Police’s specialist Art & Antiques Unit reported that they had had “no referrals to support the claim that the London art market is experiencing an upsurge in artefacts emanating from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq”.

The same statement went on to say: “It is often experts and practitioners from London museums and members of the London art market community who bring to our attention their concerns about particular artefacts.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I repeat: while the authorities, archaeologists and journalists demand from us dealers detailed documentary evidence for every artefact traded, they appear to feel no obligation to apply similar standards to the arbitrary claims and accusations they make regarding looted antiquities and the trade, thus criminalizing, without a shred of evidence, a large group of innocent people who cannot defend themselves. Collectors are people like you and me, but also artists, doctors and lawyers who spend money from their salaries to buy objects for their collection, to cherish and care for. As I have shown you, there are plenty of objects circulating in the legitimate market to serve collectors. These people, and I know a few, would never knowingly buy freshly looted objects. They would not touch such material without any provenance, because that’s what we are talking about, stolen objects without any market value and not “priceless treasures” as the media likes to publish. Please don’t get me wrong, as in all fields of economic activity, the trade in ancient art also has its crooks; we acknowledge that. But it is important that we gain an accurate picture of the problem so that

the authorities can act appropriately and not waste the precious time and resources of law enforcement agencies.

Damaging of sites by authorities

Strangely enough, the press seems not in the least upset by the destruction taking place in the same areas, not by looters, but by the authorities themselves. This satellite picture shows the Syrian army digging in five army tanks into an excavation (as the US army has done in Baghdad during the second gulf war). There are also many cases of urban expansion into archaeological sites. In Egypt, many sites remain unprotected. Here you see an excavation area in Heliopolis, Egypt, where every morning the archaeologists have to start shovelling garbage before they can resume excavating. When they returned the following year, they found this construction **in** an as-yet unexcavated temple area.

Protection of cultural property seems to have two standards: The police and art dealers are expected to act on every single insignificant object, whereas in the source countries themselves highly important ancient remains are just shovelled away, before archaeologists have had a chance to excavate.

Financing terror??

It is gradually becoming clear that the financing of terror with antiquities has been grossly exaggerated. None of these claims has a good provenance. IADAA has spent a lot of effort in researching these claims back to their source only to find that there was no source, or the source has been misinterpreted.

It started June 15th 2014 with an article in the Guardian, about the USB sticks confiscated during a raid on IS leader Abu al-Bilawi. Reportedly, they mentioned antiquities worth \$36 million from the al-Nabuk region alone. This was presented as the proof of financing of IS with antiquities. Later research, however, showed that the documents' translation was incorrect; it did not mention antiquities at all. But the word was out.

On December 5th, 2015 the New Yorker published a well-researched article about the raid in May 2015 on Abu Sayyaf, a high level commander of IS who had a senior role in overseeing the gas and oil operations, a key source of the group's revenue. The journalist Ben Taub asked Professor Rachael Goldman to appraise the confiscated antiquities. She responded,; "... What you are showing is sort of, like, junk." This was corroborated by a curator of ancient art from a prominent museum. It will not surprise you that I can confirm this as well. Nevertheless this junk was published as a major haul of looted antiquities by the authorities. Documents found during the same raid, show that the income from the sale of looted antiquities is at most just a drop in the IS bucket. Dr Neil Brodie, a well-known opponent of the trade, estimates, after thorough analysing the Abu Sayyaf documents, that it is at most 0.8% of total IS income.

And how about the museums in Syria that have been robbed and their content sold at the black market, as we read in papers? In some museums thefts have occurred, but according to Maamoun Abdulkarim, the head of the Syrian antiquities service, he and his team managed to evacuate all local archaeological museums, sometimes even with the help of local insurgents. They brought their content of 300,000 objects to a safe place in Damascus. I heard Mr Abdulkarim say, during a conference in Berlin December 2014: "If you see pictures of museums presented as robbed and empty, it is not true,; it was us. 99% of the objects are safe." This slide is from his presentation in London, April 2015. I have not read a word about this in the papers. On a question about smuggling, he answered that he was not worried because the majority of smuggled items were insignificant minor objects. Important objects could be returned anyway. On May 13, Mr Abdulkarim was also reported as attributing the absence of looted material in traditional market centres such as Paris, Brussels or London to

“a greater sensitivity to stolen artefacts in the international community since the experience with Iraq in the past decade, and to the realization that many of these may be fakes”.

Let there be no doubt, we also see the satellite photos with holes dug by looters; the horrible destruction is obvious. According to Jesse Casana of the university of Arkansas, who studied satellite imagery from 1,300 of the 20,000 Syrian archaeological sites, there is definitely digging going on by all parties in the conflict. However, “digging is not finding”, as my daughter, who is an archaeologist, has experienced. A group of 50 professionals can excavate a site for a whole summer and find nothing of museum quality. One wonders how many of the holes we see in these pictures were actually empty? My personal speculation is that 98% of the holes did not contain any saleable objects. An expert in near Eastern archaeology, Dr Lucas Petit, recently confirmed that people will keep digging, even if they don't find anything, because they hope to find gold one day. He has witnessed people digging all season directly next to his own excavation, in an area where they could expect to find nothing. Could that be a reason why no objects are offered to us?

No objects offered to us

Over the past two years, IADAA has checked several times with every member to see if they have been offered anything from the troubled areas, and they reported back: no, not a single questionable Syrian or Iraqi object had been offered to any of our members.

Against the expectations of many, neither in Europe nor in the USA has anything of significance been found or offered for sale. One expert who is **not** surprised by this is James McAndrew, who spent 27 years as a Senior Special Agent working at US Customs and the Department of Homeland Security where he set up and developed the antiquities division, developing and implementing the national investigations training programme titled "Fighting Illicit Traffic in Cultural Property at US Ports of Entry". From him we know that in the odd 10 years following the first and second gulf wars, only three cases of confiscation of antiquities took place, all of them minor. You will know when looted Syrian and Iraqi items are seized in the US, he says, because the authorities will go out of their way to give the seizures maximum publicity. So far, though, the media has been silent on this.

In September last year in the USA the Secretary of State authorized a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to the significant disruption of the sale and/or trade of oil and antiquities by, for, on behalf of, or to benefit ISIL, also known as DAESH. Now, 8 months later, the deafening silence on this issue begs the question as to whether anyone at all has come forward to claim the reward or even part of it. I tried to get an answer to this question from the FBI representative Bonnie Magness-Gardiner, who was present at a meeting on May 25th at EUROPOL headquarters in the Hague, where I made a similar presentation as this one. Her answer was: “The reward is a state department project, of which I have no knowledge.” And she refused to talk about it further. I believe that if anyone had come forward with information, the FBI would need to follow it up, so I have concluded that no one has come forward.

During the same Europol conference, I became aware of an alarming fact. Following a presentation from Dr Saskia Hufnagel ; *“Financing terrorism b.m.o. looted artefacts”*, the question was asked: What sources of information did you use? The answer was, let's put it mildly: surprising: one of her sources was the National Geographic magazine....

In the UK in April, the reporter in a Channel 4 documentary titled “ISIS and the Missing Treasures” told how he had worked on the investigation for over a year to expose the illicit trade in ISIS-linked looted artefacts in London, including eight months undercover, supported by what he described as a “crack team of modern day Monuments Men and Women”, expert archaeologists and academics, at least one of whom is a publicly avowed opponent of the

trade. The filming and the editing process went out of its way to link every item shown to ISIS, and despite creating the impression throughout that this was so, in the end the programme had to admit that it was unable to show a single object that could be linked to ISIS. Nevertheless, the reporter went on to the BBC the following day and claimed that the illicit trade in ISIS-linked artefacts did exist in London, although he could not show any evidence to support this claim.

As noted above, the Metropolitan Police confirmed that they had had “no referrals” to support the claims. If the reporter had the evidence, would he not have shouted it from the rooftops?

The programme is now the subject of a formal complaint to the broadcasters.

Ladies and gentlemen, I now come to the end of my presentation.

Yes destruction is happening; yes there is illicit digging; yes there is smuggling over the borders of Turkey and Lebanon. However, in the past three years no proof has been presented that Islamic State is substantially financed with looted antiquities, as I have demonstrated. A draconian law on cultural property may be passed in Germany soon, because even governments act on tabloid stories without fact checking. This will damage the old tradition of collecting, without solving the problem of looting at all.

Protecting the sites “in situ”

We do believe that the only effective action against looting is protection of the sites ‘in situ’ that is an important obligation formulated 45 years ago by UNESCO in article 5. For archaeology it is vital that excavations can be done in undisturbed soil. Only then can invaluable context information be obtained. That is the reason why the protection of archaeological sites is so important. Archaeologists and dealers agree that it is vital **to prevent** illicit excavations. It is obvious that this is problematic in Syria at the moment, but elsewhere it can and has to be done. And if appropriate publicity is given to thefts from museums and storage facilities, (as also obliged by article 5) we, the legitimate trade, will be happy to help recover these stolen objects if and when they are offered to us. In the past years we have helped to recover various objects stolen from museums. One of our members has returned an object that was stolen in the 1920s. We maintain good relations with the police in the UK, France and the Netherlands, but unfortunately not in some other countries. IADAA is able and willing to help. As soon as we receive photos of stolen objects, we inform our members and put the information on our website. Art dealers have a visual memory, so in case we are offered these objects, we will recognise them and inform the police. We are also willing to share our expertise to assess quickly whether an object is fake or authentic.

I conclude for today: Let’s all work together.

- The trade is as horrified by the destruction and iconoclasm as anyone else and we share a common cause in wishing to defeat it.
- The trade has more incentive than anyone else to stop the crooks because of the damage they are causing the reputation of the legitimate trade.
- We will not find a workable solution unless all parties to the debate work together, including the trade. (Law enforcement, Politicians, Academics, Archaeologists, Curators).

Thank you for your attention.

Vincent Geerling June 10th 2016

Chairman of IADAA

